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Nelson, Gary Soto, Ernesto Trejo,

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AMERICA AND RUSSIA

Norman Birnbaum and William Phillips

THE RADICAL SOAP OPERA

David Zane Mairowitz

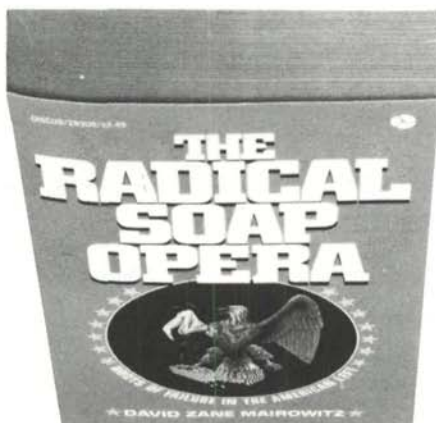
The American Left in the 20th century...

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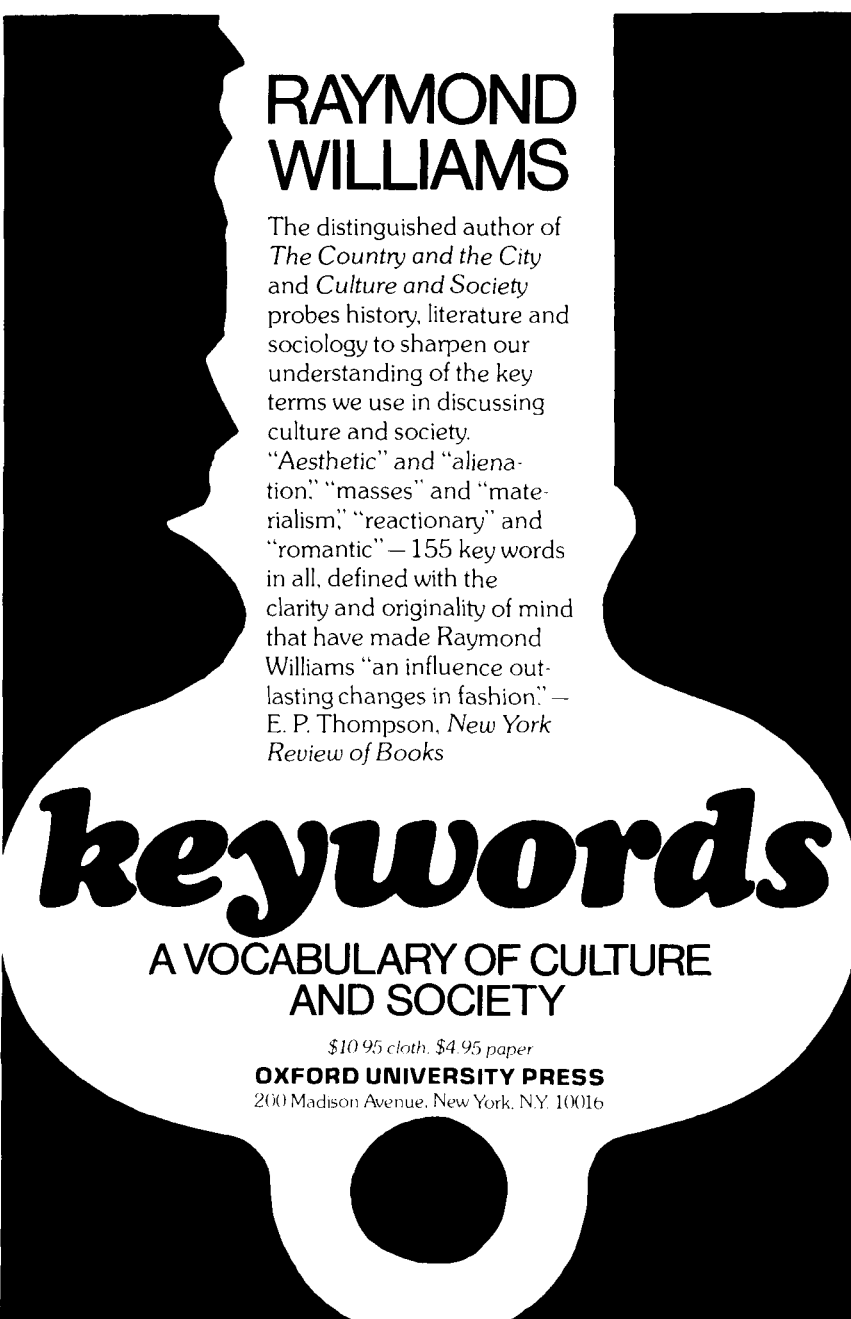
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**George Stade,
Leonard Kriegel,
Alicia Ostriker**

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For PR's

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NOTES

MORRIS DICKSTEIN's newest book *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* will be published by Basic Books this fall. . . . *May Movement: Revolt and Reform* and *Post-Industrial Society* are **ALAIN TOURAINE'S** latest books. He is with the Centre D'Etudes Des Movements Sociaux. . . . Braziller will be bringing out a collection of **ROBIN MAGOWAN**'s poems in the fall. His piece in this issue is part of a memoir called *Maya Revisited*. . . . **JOY WILLIAMS** lives in Siesta Key, Florida. She has just completed a novel *The Changeling* which will be published by Doubleday. . . . **MICHAEL ROSENTHAL** is the associate dean of Columbia College. . . . The work of **GARY SOTO** appears in his recently compiled anthology *Entrance: 4 Chicano Poets* published by Greenfield Review Press. . . . **RUTGER KOPLAND** is the pseudonym of a psychiatrist who lives and teaches in Holland. He has published five volumes of poetry. . . . **RAY A. YOUNG BEAR**'s poems have appeared in anthologies published by Harper & Row and Viking. He is an art student at the University of Northeastern Iowa. . . . **ERNESTO TREJO** has just completed a translation of the selected poems of Tristan Solarte for the Windhover Press. He is currently at work on a novel. . . . *Chicago* a book of poems by **NILS NELSON** has just been published by the Ironwood Press. He works as a janitor in a department store in San Francisco. . . . **MARJORIE GRENE** is a professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Davis. Her essay is part of a forthcoming book *Philosophy In and Out of Europe*. . . . Rumanian born, **E. M. CIORAN** has lived in Paris since 1937 where he writes "essays in praise of the decadence of Western civilization." His latest book is entitled *The Trouble With Being Born*. . . . **ALICIA OSTRIKER**'s annotated edition of the complete poems of William Blake is due from Penguin next spring. She will be on leave from Rutgers next year working on a volume of poetry criticism and on her own poetry. . . . **LEONARD MICHAELS** tells us that during a recent medical examination it was discovered that his heart is in the right place. . . . **STEVEN SIMMONS** is currently a fellow in the Modern Thought and Literature program at Stanford University. . . . Currently a Guggenheim Fellow working on a book about D. H. Lawrence and the First World War, **PAUL DELANY** teaches English at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.

We're pleased to announce that beginning with our next issue John Ashbery will become the poetry editor of *Partisan Review*.

Harold Brodkey's story "The Pain Continuum" which appeared in *Partisan Review* #1, 1976 was made possible in part with assistance from Creative Artists Public Service program.

POINTS AFTER . . .

HARDHEADS AND SOFTHEADS. Norman Podhoretz's call for a stronger anti-Communist foreign policy in the April issue of *Commentary*, which Norman Birnbaum comments on in the following piece in this issue of *PR*, strikes me as an unusual combination of *realpolitik* and ideology. Some of what he says is true, some untrue, some beside the point. But he does have a sense of the central issues. Hence he raises the fundamental questions about the future of the United States, and he must be commended for being so forthright in expressing views that many liberal conservatives have learned to hedge on or to conceal. In any case, I take Podhoretz's conservative manifesto to represent the opinions, overt or covert, of all those who feel that the United States is betraying its role as the guardian of freedom and retreating to a new isolationism. But he does not make the causes of this turn very clear, and so far as I can make out he attributes it mostly to a failure of will on the part of the ruling elites of the country. The most telling evidence of our defeatism, Podhoretz concludes, is the widespread acceptance of the idea that we are doomed to a world of accommodation instead of confrontation.

As Birnbaum very persuasively indicates, Podhoretz is wide open to criticism from the left. But I want to take another tack: rather than punch holes in Podhoretz's arguments, which still leaves unanswered the questions he raises, I would like to consider the questions themselves.

To begin with, let me say that so far as anyone can claim to know the mood of the country Norman Podhoretz is obviously correct in observing that anti-Communist intervention is not very popular these days. And he is probably also correct in predicting the loss of power and influence of the United States if it should go isolationist, that is, if it should commit itself to defending only its own borders. I stress these political realities here because the liberal and radical left have usually pretended they do not exist, or that the anti-Communists have invented them solely to scare the country into supporting a large military budget at home and an adventurous policy abroad.

I must say, however, that Podhoretz invites a dismissal of his entire argument by reducing these real considerations about the future of the country to metaphors of hardness and softness, instead of talking about real possibilities and alternatives. Like most conservative ideologists, he attributes our softheadedness to such vague psychic forces as failure of nerve and weakness of character, which remind us of campaign rhetoric designed to win votes not to solve problems. Podhoretz also insists that the attacks on the CIA and on the Presidency were really part of the movement to weaken those arms of the government that could sustain an anti-Communist policy—as though the abuses of power by Nixon and by the CIA were not sufficient explanation for the assault on them. And I must say that Podhoretz's novel idea that McCarthy's irresponsible anti-Communism at home served to alert the country to the menace of Communism abroad is a most ingenious explanation not of the influence of McCarthy but of the working of the conservative mind. My own feeling is just the opposite: that the main effect of McCarthy's brand of anti-Communism was to make all anti-Communism suspect.

But aside from ideology, the issues raised by Podhoretz are basically these: why has there been an ostensible shift in American policy; what viable alternatives are there; and such general questions as: is there a genuine national interest, to what extent is it tied to an active anti-Communism, and finally what stake do liberals and the left have in a national interest and in a concomitant anti-Communism. Obviously, these questions are too large and complex to explore fully here; but it might be useful at least to suggest some approach to them.

1. If we are no longer so ready to intervene abroad—Podhoretz's examples are Angola, Portugal, Israel—it is not because of some psychic transformations but because such a policy has on the whole failed. Have the lessons of Vietnam already been forgotten? And though Podhoretz hints at the roots of the failure when he speaks of the shortsightedness of business interests, he quickly veers off into psychology. The fact is that the business mentality that mostly creates official opinion, particularly in a Republican administration, has no sense of national purpose beyond its own rhetorical slogans and its immediate financial interests, not even a sense of its own nature, of its own powers and limitations, and scarcely any sense of either the appeals or the methods of the Communists. If one points to the corruptions and the political myopia of Western society, it is not simply, as Podhoretz assumes, to vent one's disaffection; it is to express one's disgust and sorrow at the inability of our society to act decently and intelligently in defense of those freedoms it proclaims, and which are still, despite all our failures, incomparably greater than those in the Communist countries. The truth is

that one cannot entrust the welfare of the country to the conservative politicians, who have talked themselves into believing in laissez-faire thinking, which boils down to a mad scramble for profits, votes, and popularity. The great irony is that they have created the very kind of society which they thrive on excoriating, a truly anarchist society.

2. What are the alternatives? Aside from competing and paralyzing financial interests, our political ineptness is too well known to require further proof. When politicians do become aware that Communists exploit naive discontent, they make a futile gesture of support for backward nations or radical movements. But clearly a business-oriented government, even with occasional gifts of arms and money, cannot compete with the left, which is usually able to capture those forces that naturally gravitate toward radical parties and governments. And even those peoples whose security depends on the United States often keep their political distance from us to be free of the taint of American support. Perhaps the basic dilemma of the United States is that, unlike the Communists, it cannot combine its power politics with an appeal to morality.

In the past, our overwhelming military strength compensated for our political backwardness. But the conservatives seem unwilling to draw the necessary conclusions from the new balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States. If we cannot rely on force, we are reduced to the use of politics—and what kind of politics can the Ford administration, for instance, conjure up to persuade the Italian or French or Portuguese people not to vote Communist? We have already seen the results of our political intelligence in Vietnam.

This is not to advocate despair, though no sane person can be an optimist in this period. Nor am I saying that nothing should be done. I am merely suggesting that fantasies of toughness do not constitute a concrete or viable course of action. And it is certainly not clear just what the hard-liners would have us do—other than to help Israel.

3. Perhaps the basic question raised by Podhoretz is that of national interest. His assumption is that an aggressive stand against Communists everywhere serves both the national interest and a broader human interest, an assumption that runs counter to the views of many liberals and radicals. It is true that it is mostly out-and-out Marxists who maintain openly that a militant anti-Communism serves only reactionary and imperialist interests, and, therefore, divorce themselves completely from American foreign politics. But there is a general tendency now on the left to oppose the kind of intervention we have engaged in, usually on moral or political grounds, without suggesting that the proper kind of intervention might be acceptable.

Now, the issue of national interest is too complex to be resolved by

either a right or a left stance. But I would like to suggest that short of some cataclysmic social change a critical attitude toward the allocations of power is not incompatible with a concern for the fate of the country. And though liberals and the left usually find it politically convenient not to face the issue, they are not really indifferent to the possibility of a national decline—perhaps they can afford to seem indifferent because they assume that American power will not be diminished. However, a position that is critical without being totally detached is more difficult to maintain: it is much more difficult than either the conservative faith, which is little more than patriotism blown up into an ideology, or the extreme radical attitude stemming from Leninism, which is predicated on an indifference to the fate of one's country, to the point even of indifference to its military defeat. Perhaps the main question liberals and radicals have to ask themselves is whether the national interest can be reduced to a euphemism for big business and corrupt politics. To put it more broadly, the question might be whether—and how—our government can act to safeguard democratic values in other parts of the world and whether its interest in freedom is incidental to protecting the profit system against any kind of socialization. If the world is to be saved—from tyranny, war, poverty—it has to be in the name of a more inspiring ideal than free enterprise and a politics more convincing than a handout of democratic slogans, a rhetorical game which everyone, from left to right, has learned to play these days. Podhoretz might be right in saying that the United States should be seen as promoting its own interests whether it is supporting dictatorial or democratic regimes. But leaving aside the moral implications of such a policy, what is being questioned is not only whether it can be successful but also whether it is failing because it does not embrace a social vision larger than the fate of American power.

W.P.

NORMAN PODHORETZ'S WAR. Recall the celebrated remark of a famous general. My right flank is shattered, he declared, and my left flank is in retreat; my center is wavering—therefore, I attack. The example appears to have influenced Mr. Norman Podhoretz. In the April issue of *Commentary*, he denounces American conservatives and liberals alike for their cowardly attitude to world Communism (indeed, toward world history itself). In an essay entitled "Making the World Safe For Communism," he describes our elites as defeatist and weak, seized by a new isolationism. Mr. Podhoretz proposes to call upon ordinary Americans (whom he describes as exhilarated by Professor Moynihan's recent performance at the United Nations) to impose upon the rest of us the only policy the times require. That policy, of course, would consist of a general offensive against Communism, everywhere. It is a large program, with large assumptions; these merit examination.

Mr. Podhoretz understands "the new isolationism" as a recrudescence of an old American axiom, "the proposition that the United States should never go to war to any purpose other than the defense of its territory against attack." His essay, however, is not primarily concerned with an analysis of that proposition. Most of us are troubled by a problem simply ignored by *Commentary's* editor. Thermonuclear war poses a threat to the existence of any values, to the continuation of civilization of any kind, to life on earth itself. If Gerald Ford did not grasp this as a congressman, he appears to have done so—to his credit—since becoming President. A politician appalled, even terrified, at the prospect of thermonuclear war is not cowardly or morally defective; he is merely behaving with a minimum of rationality. Since Mr. Podhoretz ignores the question, we are entitled to conclude that he is concerned primarily with something other than our country's policy toward the rest of the world. A deeper reading of his text would show that his central interest is indeed elsewhere—in our country's interpretation of itself. Mr. Podhoretz does tax us with a failure of political will, inextricably bound to a failure of conviction. His description of world politics has a haphazard connection with a situation which is bewildering and changing. That description, however, has moral functions: it is intended to provide large simplifications, which, if grasped, can raise us to heroism—or, at the very

least, still our wretched doubts.

The process of simplification is evident in Mr. Podhoretz's division of American political opinion into two parts: there are liberals and conservatives. Actually, I think that he is most troubled by a third, or radical, potential in our politics, but, for the moment, let us follow the argument in his terms. As a description of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively, in their attitudes to foreign affairs, his insistence on the existence of two camps makes some sense. It would make even more sense had Mr. Podhoretz added that, in general, both parties have shared in a consensus (now, possibly, breaking down) that nothing fundamental ought to change—either in our policy at home or our alignments abroad. In Mr. Podhoretz's view, at any rate, the recent resuscitation of isolationism can be attributed to the liberals (or Democrats) turning with single-minded emphasis to our domestic problems. He associates the change with a negative reaction to the war in Vietnam, with the McGovern Presidential candidacy in 1972. Again, that candidacy expressed a radical upsurge in the Democratic Party—but let us return to Mr. Podhoretz's argument.

The liberals, he tells us, were active and enthusiastic supporters of an activist and interventionist foreign policy until very recently. Remember John Kennedy's declaration that our country would bear any sacrifice "to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Surely Mr. Podhoretz is correct. The academics, bureaucrats, corporate lawyers, industrialists, publicists, and unionists composing our liberal elite did support (and some of them directed) the cold war and its armed sequels in Korea and Vietnam. After all, systematic anti-Communism had important accompaniments: economic expansion at home and abroad, the development of an imperial apparatus—with thousands of jobs for the Liberal elite, funding and benefits of all kinds. Anti-Communism mobilized some of the deepest strains of moralism in our history. John Foster Dulles notwithstanding, it was not entirely an exercise in Protestant hypocrisy. There were elements of generosity, ameliorationist hopes and reformist projects mixed with policies of sheer aggrandisement; John Kennedy presided over both the Green Berets and the Peace Corps. The Vietnam war was certainly, in no small part, made in Cambridge.

Liberals, according to Mr. Podhoretz, no longer pronounce the modern equivalent of the phrase, *Civus Romanum sum*, with enthusiasm. They now wish us to pursue far more modest goals abroad: the lost war in Vietnam was a sobering experience. Liberals, further, now confront no backlash from the right—so feared by Henry Kissinger after our retreat from Vietnam. Conservatives are equally skeptical about a global policy of intervention, eager to do business with Brezhnev and everyone else. Again, Mr. Pod-

horetz's account of things is plausible, on the surface, but what about the explanations he attaches to it?

It is true that some liberals turned away from global intervention after the loss of the war in Vietnam. Others, however, turned away from the war when militarily it still might have been won. They were repelled by its brutality and callousness, its destructive frenzy, the chauvinistic pathology it uncovered in our national life. Not all of these liberals were radicalized in the process by any means, although the attendant decomposition of the American political consensus accomplished that for no small number. Mr. Podhoretz describes the current liberal perspective on the world, after our supposed turn inward, as follows:

Of course there would still be foreign affairs even in this scheme of things, but they would now be based on cooperation rather than power and conflict and competition. Our new role would be governed by an understanding, in another favorite liberal phrase of the day, of the growing "interdependence" of the countries. The world was becoming a place in which—as a prominent exponent of this view would later put it—"nobody was in charge." The United States could no longer control its allies and clients, and the Soviet Union was having similar troubles, as witness the break-up of the Communist world into opposing camps and the growing independence of national Communist parties in Europe and elsewhere of Russian control. Nor could the United States or the Soviet Union any longer throw its weight around with impunity. Sadat could expel Soviet technicians from Egypt without fear of military reprisal and the once mighty United States (as would soon be demonstrated in irrefutable terms) could be helplessly at the mercy of a few otherwise impotent oil sheikhdoms. Given all this, a kind of peaceful collective bargaining on a planetary scale must inevitably be the order of the future.

Mr. Podhoretz seems to dislike the idea of "cooperation" and "peaceful collective bargaining" as modes of world political behavior and especially as relationships this country will be obliged, increasingly, to enter. He prefers, quite explicitly, that we continue to throw our weight around. For several reasons, his anxiety is premature. The desperate opportunism of our foreign policy for the past five years does not suggest that we have embraced either "cooperation" or "peaceful collective bargaining." (Recall Henry Kissinger's threats of military action to guarantee our sources of oil in the Mideast, and his Lear-like performance, now, with respect to Western European Communism. "I shall do such things. . . .") Our elites have adopted different tactics. The remarks addressed by Kissinger and Sonnenfeldt to our diplomats recently show that they interpret *détente* as an American-Soviet condominium—at everyone else's expense. That, surely,

shows no inclination to let the world slip out of control. As for our helplessness before Arab sheikhdoms, that seems exaggerated; many in Congress cringe before our own oil companies, not desert chieftains. Surely no one believes that conflict, competition, and power are likely to disappear soon as central elements in international politics.

Still, the new map of the world as Mr. Podhoretz sketches it is a useful approximation of what has happened. The trouble with it as far as he is concerned, is that it apparently makes the reduction of world politics to a Manichean confrontation difficult. (It would hardly assist, for instance, Professor Moynihan were he as a Senate candidate to try to mobilize the anxieties of many voters bewildered by history—and, therefore, in the same condition as the rest of us.) Moreover, Mr. Podhoretz is too easy on the liberals. They once favored a two-part policy: the Green Berets and the Peace Corps. The Green Berets have now been left to John Wayne's colleague, Ronald Reagan, and the liberals prefer to concentrate on a global Peace Corps. Even Senator Church, however, will not attack the central questions directly. This country remains the center of a vast economic imperium. (Over half of IBM's profits come from outside our borders.) Ameliorationist hopes and reformist projects, are bound to fail unless the fact of imperium is reconsidered. Good will alone won't, in short, arrest the global civil war which, increasingly, opposes richer and poorer nations. Finally, Mr. Podhoretz overemphasizes the liberal change of heart. Many liberals who backed the war are running for President (or for Secretary of State and National Security Advisor), still others command the foundations and control the media and the universities. The only liberal consensus there is can be found in an (abominable) agreement not to argue too much about the recent past. Mr. Podhoretz's penchant for drama has led him to overlook an authentic American tragedy, our lack of a large opposition, ready and able to replace our failed elites.

No matter; Mr. Podhoretz raises his call to battle. Not alone should we resist Soviet Communism, he tells us, but we ought to struggle against Communism in any form. "In short, if a world dominated by Soviet Communism is likely to be a world given over to barbarism and misery, the chances are that a world dominated by Communism in a variety of national guises would be an improvement only to the extent that it is better to be enslaved by autonomous local tyrants than by puppets of a foreign land." That, to be sure, would apply to national movements other than Communist ones. What is surprising, however, is that Mr. Podhoretz should try to convince a reasonably literate public that one political and social movement is on its way to supremacy in our world. The evidence points to opposite conclusions. The political movements we see around us express, in dizzying and

uncertain combinations, Rousseauism, Marxism, Maoism, nationalism, Leninism, Buddhism, Pan-Islamism, the varieties of political Christianity, tens of tribalisms. Economically, their doctrines range from piratical capitalism to *compradore* regimes, from state capitalism to state socialism, from peasant proprietorship to Cambodian communalism. Mr. Podhoretz's own political allies (George Meany and Henry Jackson) by sponsoring Solzhenitsyn have indicated their belief in a pan-Slavic and agrarian Russian future.

There is no way any reader of Mr. Podhoretz's essay could learn that the approaching electoral success of Communist-Socialist coalitions in France and Italy confronts us with a new situation. The publics in these countries obviously seek a new model of society. In France, the Communist Party is electorally subordinate to a revived Socialist Party. In Italy, the Italian Communist Party has developed its own Communism derived from national traditions—and is, in any event, reluctant to enter government without the Christian Democrats. Mr. Podhoretz presumably approves of Henry Kissinger's and Alexander Haig's warnings to the Europeans to vote our ticket only. Coming from the men who ordered the end of democracy in Chile, the warning is not without a certain authority. What, however, of the suggestions from the Gaullist French Prime Minister and Social Democratic German Chancellor, that Kissinger and Haig shut up? Does Mr. Podhoretz suppose that the West Europeans are unruly children, who require our tutelage—or, possibly, the stern regimen of a military academy? The European right no doubt has its fanatics who are preparing for civil war. If Mr. Podhoretz does not wish for this eventuality, would he not do well to cease taxing the rest of us with softness to "Communism"?

I've intimated that Mr. Podhoretz's essential interest is in our own political life, not in the world beyond our borders. He observes that many liberals no longer favor what is now termed the Imperial Presidency. I am not sure that this is true when so many Democrats are so anxious for a Humphrey candidacy. Still, a certain disillusionment has set in. In this country, the strong Presidency has been our equivalent of the modern Prince. It was, and is, the only institution able to gather sufficient political weight to strike at the dispersed and omnipresent forces of inertia and privilege. Mr. Podhoretz ignores the domestic roots of recent criticism of the presidency. Our federal bureaucracy is cumbersome and often unresponsive to public or Congressional will. The Executive has been subject often enough to successful pressures from the special interests it was supposed to oppose in the public interest. We have no institutions adequate to a decentralized democracy. Experiments in these are proceeding in Western Europe, under auspices exceedingly uncongenial to Mr. Podhoretz. The public mood mistakenly and short-sightedly interpreted as "conservative"

(the interest in the candidacies of Governors Brown and Carter) suggests that the public may be seeking not less government, but a different kind of government. Senators Humphrey and Jackson, of course, are unsympathetic to this inchoate tendency. It is there, nonetheless, and it has long-term political implications which cannot be dismissed by references to a supposed national failure of nerve.

Mr. Podhoretz thinks that too much has been made of the abuses of executive power described by the phrase, Watergate. More precisely, he argues that these abuses have been a pretext for an attack on an entire system of government. The Imperial Presidency was the vehicle for a strong overt foreign policy. The Central Intelligence Agency functioned, similarly, as the Imperial Presidency's covert instrument. We are now experiencing, Mr. Podhoretz suggests, a dismantling of the apparatus which alone can conduct the kind of foreign policy he thinks we need. Here again, some of his anxiety seems excessive. Congress has behaved recently with exemplary cowardice with respect to the Central Intelligence Agency, and even a weak President like Ford has not hesitated to make effective claims to "Executive Privilege" in the domain of National Security. Much too much remains secret—as foreign policy advisors no different in outlook from the present ones look forward to January twentieth of next year.

Mr. Podhoretz's analysis of the critique of the Central Intelligence Agency is worth reading. He suggests that the agency is now subject to attacks which can be likened only to McCarthyism. In an interesting phrase, he tells us that McCarthyism had the function of concretizing the Communist threat, of mobilizing the American public for the cold war abroad. Similarly, the attacks on the CIA have a demobilizing function—and, indeed, intent. The analogy is not credible. In the McCarthyite period, federal agencies, congressional committees, the media and employers, combined and conspired to defame, persecute and penalize individuals accused of holding unacceptable beliefs. The attack on the CIA, by contrast, is an offensive intended to recapture our constitutional liberties—and to regain for the public its right to know, and for the Congress its right to vote upon, foreign engagements undertaken by a government agency.

Since Mr. Podhoretz seems to have a good deal of sympathy for the CIA, we ought to consider his arguments. He describes the CIA as a "liberal creation." True in part, but we ought not to ignore the initial role of corporate lawyers and financiers in the agency; its Ivy and WASP character. Jewish professors no doubt supplied it with statistics on the Soviet economy, and Greeks and Italians killed at its behest. The orders came from the Dulleses and Helmses of this society. Mr. Podhoretz says of the CIA that its political tone was found congenial by large numbers of anti-Communist lib-

erals, "including scholars, writers and trade unionists." If Mr. Podhoretz knows something that we do not know, he has an obligation to tell us. If persons in our public life were indeed covertly directed and subsidized by the CIA, the CIA was and is a threat to a democratic society.

It is difficult to avoid the impression of a large degree of naiveté and unreality in Mr. Podhoretz's defense of the CIA. Its campaign against "Communism" abroad has often subverted the purposes of anti-Communism, the defense of a free and pluralistic polity. When Mr. Podhoretz adduces as evidence for the monolithic evil of Communism in his essay the fact that even the Greek dictatorship was overthrown, he neglects to tell us who installed it in the first place. Is our public life really improved by the background presence of a government agency ready to fund any intellectual or journalist corrupt enough to take its money? Does Mr. Podhoretz suppose that the groups backed by the CIA abroad are useful allies in the struggle against tyranny?

Consider the record: Mr. Podhoretz refers to a few million dollars given to anti-Communist Italian politicians. He has not done his homework. In Italy, the CIA (and its corporate ally, Lockheed, which apparently acted in concert with it there and in Japan, and possibly Germany as well) subsidized a gang of thieves who looted the Italian state and economy. It also backed a clique of fascist plotters who instigated a campaign of terror and who planned the overthrow of the Italian Republic. Our embassy's protégé in Italy, Signor Fanfani, was a fascist ideologue, the author of anti-Semitic drivel. With friends of this sort, we hardly require Italian enemies. The situation is not much different elsewhere. The CIA's clients in Germany include the group around Strauss, which used the German intelligence service to engineer the departure of Willy Brandt from office. Some of these persons are, literally, Nazis. Simple self-respect would demand that a Jewish magazine refrain from endorsing the policies which made allies of these swine. Should the CIA join with the French right to instigate civil war in France to stop the Socialist-Communist coalition from entering government, we cannot suppose that its French agents will be other than the Vichyites and their spiritual heirs. In a better world, Mr. Podhoretz would not wish to be seen in this company. Why does he suppose that he needs these allies in this world?

Mr. Podhoretz is worried lest our commitment to Israel prove tenuous. Is Israel well served by those who would urge it to make alliances with the Voerstes of this world? Recall Israel's disappointment with the French. France was Israel's ally until it decided to cultivate the Arabs. Since Israel's strength is moral, its appeal can be effective only if that is remembered. Making of Israel an advance post in a struggle against the rest of the world is

not a formula for the security of the Jewish state.

The author's worries, if not limitless, extend to the conservatives. American conservatives, he thinks, are motivated by base material considerations: business is business. Dr. Kissinger, by contrast, earns praise for beating an unwilling and sad retreat from world power in the face of his countrymen's lassitude and lack of conviction. Suppose, however, that the conservative interest in doing business and our lack of national purpose are connected. Suppose, in other words, that our capitalist society is incapable of generating either Athenian or Spartan virtues. Mr. Podhoretz is unsure which he prefers, but he deplores the fact that we are acting like late Romans. If our society's national substance is so eroded, perhaps we would do well to refrain from offering ourselves as an example to the rest of the world. I do not, myself, think that our spiritual resources are so depleted—but perhaps I am more reconciled with our country, at this moment, than is Mr. Podhoretz.

Mr. Podhoretz fears that fewer numbers of Americans these days, are critical of the Soviet system. He is quite wrong. Never were its monstrous aspects evident to so many—and not only in our country but everywhere in the world. The Soviet ideological threat is, for that reason, small. Our own confusion and tentativeness, by contrast, may be a sign of our potential, of our historical strength rather than the opposite. Mr. Podhoretz would like to see us marching through our own equivalent of Red Square. A mature society, however, requires less exhortation and more real argument over its politics.

Finally, Mr. Podhoretz recurs to the populism he once denounced in the left. He calls upon our masses to reverse our elites. His reference to Professor Moynihan's performance at the United Nations ignores the fact that, whatever Moynihan's intentions, he appealed to the chauvinism and xenophobia (and racism) of our population. On the logic of Mr. Podhoretz's own argument, our society lacks will, cannot generate values, or regenerate our old ones. The recourse to defensive and visceral popular reactions is the equivalent of Nixon's and Agnew's appeal to the hard-hats. It is not a rational politics on the face of it, and can be explained only by the substratum, the hidden language, of Mr. Podhoretz's essay. What he fears is less the failure of will of liberals and conservatives, than the development of a new political argument. Mr. Podhoretz's enemies are not the liberals or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans, tired elites or acquiescent masses. They are ourselves: the radical party in America. The essay appears to be a regression to the 1950s. In fact, Mr. Podhoretz deserves praise for his prescience. He has fired an early shot in the struggles of the 1980s. But that is matter for later dispute.

N.B.

Morris Dickstein

BLACK HUMOR AND HISTORY:

Fiction in the Sixties

It was axiomatic a few years ago to assert that the electronic media had entirely displaced the printed word, that young people in the sixties didn't read, let alone write; that all the most talented of them went into film, or politics, or rock; that those who did write novels simply turned away from the gaudy carnival of contemporary life (as Tom Wolfe said in *The New Journalism*), "gave up by default," leaving the way clear for the hip new journalists and rhetoricians. According to Wolfe, novelists became "Neo-Fabulists" who were entranced by myth and parable understandable only to themselves and lost interest in reality.

Today the enthusiasts of fiction are far less likely to be on the defensive, for the creative impulses in the novel have proved more durable than facile McLuhanite explanations of cultural change. But there is more than a grain of truth in Tom Wolfe's simplistic account. The sixties were a moribund period for the realistic novel, and perhaps in consequence the commercial market for fiction declined precipitously. Novelists who did sustain a realist method, such as Updike, Bellow, and Malamud, were weakest on the topical subjects where Wolfe's journalists were strongest—when they dragged in blacks or hippies, or worried about the war, or unisex, or the future of the moon. Yet the journalists themselves, not only Wolfe but Capote and Mailer, insistently invoked the prestige of the novel to validate their work, much as the early novelists of the eighteenth century had coyly rejected the idea of fiction and masked their work as journals or case histories. The eighteenth-century novelist had to insist that he was artless; the sixties journalist had to prove he was an

NOTE: A different and longer version of this essay will appear as a section of a forthcoming book, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, which Basic Books will publish in the late fall.

Artist. In each case the rationale was a relic of an outworn cast of mind, that the work itself would help to superannuate. What died in the sixties was not the novel but the mystique of the novel, its critical prestige, its wide and loyal audience, its status as the royal road to cultural success. The dream of the Great American Novel disintegrated, as did the line between high art and other kinds of cultural performance, but the novels that continued to be written were some of the most staggeringly ambitious that America had produced. The second coming of modernism in American fiction, which Tom Wolfe deplores and misunderstands, may have narrowed the audience for the novel and limited its ability to deal with the immediate carnival aspect of contemporary fashion, but it gave the dream of the novelist a new kind of grandiosity and range. In a topsy-turvy age that often turned trash into art and art into trash, that gaily pursued topical fascinations and ephemeral performances and showed a real genius for self-consuming artifacts—an age that sometimes valued art too little because it loved raw life too much—novels were written that are among the handful of artworks, few enough in any age, that are likely to endure. The sixties are as likely to be remembered through novels as through anything else they left behind, a bizarre prospect that need not make us shudder.

Yet Tom Wolfe is right in one respect. The future readers who look to the novels of the sixties to learn about society are sure to go awry. The kaleidoscope of fashion, the spectacular changes in morals and manners, which Wolfe claimed as rich new territory for the journalists, evoked scant interest in writers of fiction. There was little good sociology in sixties novels, even among the realists like Updike and early Roth, and there was even less in the more central and innovative strain of sixties fiction, the so-called “comic-apocalyptic” writers or black humorists. Sometimes these writers do illuminate a contemporary setting, providing news of the world that you can’t get from the News. I don’t know of a better account of the pre-Beat New York under-culture of the mid-fifties—the bars, the floaters and drifters, the artists and would-be artists, the talents and the hangers-on, and everywhere the jazz—than we get in Pynchon’s *V.*, just as he does the L.A. scene very brilliantly in his next book, *The Cry of Lot 49*. But Pynchon’s imagination goes far afield from these realistic bases, which themselves have been subtly transformed into Pynchon-

esque metaphors for certain states of mind, peculiar world-historical anxieties. Nor is Heller's *Catch-22* really "about" World War II, though it does contain a good deal of amusing (but marginal) satire on the McCarthy period (such as the Great Loyalty Oath Crusade and the scandal of "Who promoted Major Major? Who promoted Major Major?"); the book's imaginative center is elsewhere.

The imaginative ambitions of these novelists keep them from any sustained social commentary; they illuminate society less through their content than through their experiments in form, by which I mean not simply technique but the pressure of individual vision from which new technique must flow. Critics who use literature as social evidence tend to treat its content as documentation, ignoring the subtle ironies and modifications to which raw life is subjected within an imaginative work. Instead we should be looking for analogies between social change and changes in the *forms* of the arts. Form can be seen as a structure of perception, a deep-seated rhythm of experience and sensibility, by which the individual work (like the individual self) partakes of the social whole willy-nilly, without having to allude to it directly. The conservative form of the novel in the 1950s, which is reflected in Saul Bellow's comment that "realism is still the great literary breakthrough," mirrors the conserving and inward-turning character of the age. Likewise the surge of modernist and experimental fiction in the early sixties is subtly related to the new feelings of social malaise and reformist zeal that set in during the late fifties, gained impetus from the urgent, high-spirited tone of Kennedy's campaign for the presidency, and burst forth during his administration with precious little concrete progress to keep it going. In those early years of the sixties there was a scent of change in the air, a sense of things opening up, of new possibilities. This was not without its dangerous side, for, by the iron law of rising expectations, forces were aroused in society that soon overshot their prescribed bounds. The New Left and the civil rights movement did not develop under Eisenhower, when things were at their worst, but under Kennedy, when inchoate promises and possibilities were in the air. And they died under Nixon, who recreated an atmosphere of utter futility and himself embodied the vengeful spirit of middle-American backlash (as if the election of 1960 were at last undone, the sixties rolled back).

To try to relate the social atmosphere of the early sixties to the

key novels of the period would seem to be a thankless task. We all know that there is no easy correspondence between the arts and society, and that all due allowance must be made for individual genius working out its own salvation. Moreover, since books like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Catch-22*, and *V.* are long and complex books, they were also long in gestating; it's difficult to say in what sense they belong to their moment of publication. But the cultural climate of the period was also long in gestating, and the solitary labors of these very writers were surely among the points of gestation. The new sensibility of the sixties was unusually pervasive; in retrospect we can see how it touched every corner of our culture, any one of which, examined closely, helps illuminate the general ferment, the movement of change. Without abridging the distinctive claims of individual genius we can't help but notice a similarity of purpose and form, a common breakthrough, in many of the new novels. This in turn was followed by a loss of verve and force among several of the older writers, as the cultural center seemed to make one of its periodic (and rather cruel) shifts.

Our problem is complicated by the fact that there's no easy symmetry between the older and the newer novel, as some would like to claim. If the Jewish novel, with its beleaguered humanism and weighty moral seriousness, is characteristic of the earlier period, the black humorists of the early sixties offer no easy contrast. It's not simply that several were as Jewish and as morally obsessed as Malamud or Bellow, but because their fascination with the ironies and absurdities of existence flows directly out of the Jewish novel, though it gets expressed in a different way. The opposite of the Jewish novel is not black humor but Camp, which is a form of aestheticism and brittle wit directed against whatever becomes too solemnly moral and humanistic. Camp is decorative, flip, gay, and insouciant, while black humor is pitched at the breaking point where moral anguish explodes into a mixture of comedy and terror, where things are so bad you might as well laugh. This helps explain why even some of the black humorists who are not Jewish, such as Berger and Pynchon, adapt the schlemiel-figure out of Jewish fiction (Berger's Reinhart, Pynchon's Benny Profane); the schlemiel inhabits the shadowy margin between the comedy of errors and a comedy of terrors. As a chronic loser he is indestructible, the kind of man no society can do without: he'll go on

losing forever. And as a figure of fun he's a threat to no one; he's low down on the scale of Hobbesian competition, cut off from the rarefied zone of great fortunes and great falls.

Similar things are true of the other main figure at the center of sixties novels, a cousin of the schlemiel, the picaresque anti-hero. One striking difference between novels of the fifties and those of the sixties is that the former, which tend to be more psychological and to focus on the complexities of individual character, preserve a belief—inherited from nineteenth-century realism—in the possibilities of personal growth, a Freudian faith in the maturation of self through the formation of adult relationships. In picaresque fiction, however, the hero, who is often an indestructible naïf or innocent, gets propelled not into familiar human interaction but through a series of external events which are often random, bizarre, even surreal or apocalyptic. Voltaire's *Candide* is too much of an Everyman to grow or change; he cannot learn from his experience, he can only be inundated. Instead of novelistic development we find a structure of repetition and intensification: the same thing always happens, but no one will ever *learn* anything. Instead of fully rounded real-life characters we find cartoonlike puppets, manipulated according to the author's moral purpose.

Not all the black humor novels of the sixties approximate the *Candide* pattern. Kurt Vonnegut's novels come closest, especially *Slaughterhouse-Five*, whose befuddled, childlike hero, allegorically named Billy Pilgrim, is set down in a world that kills and maims in the most casual and summary way. What complicates this air of shell-shocked simplicity are the bizarre "time warps" which layer the action, so that all the disasters of crazy Billy's life seem to be happening to him simultaneously. To express what he sees as the insanity of contemporary history, Vonnegut does a pop adaptation of modernist experiments with time. Billy is a holy fool who "has come unstuck in time," who keeps uncontrollably enacting different moments of his life. As such he is a kind of novelist whose control has slipped, who remembers too much of modern history and his own private sorrow, so that the pressure has become too great, the ache to tell must somehow be relieved. This is why *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not one of Vonnegut's best books. As a writer he works best when he can be most playful and inventive, ripping off public events in inspired

burlesque, making up Borgesian religions, cultures, whole literary *oeuvres*, and writing down their texts. But faced with the firebombing of Dresden, where he himself had been a helpless bystander, a stunned survivor, he lets the intensity of his feelings overshadow the fable that tries to express them. The brilliant first chapter, which tells the story straight, overwhelms the fictional version which follows.

Compared to the moving personal presence of the author in the opening chapter, there's a thinness and insubstantiality, a puppetlike quality, to Billy Pilgrim and his fellow "characters" as they jerk through the time warps laid down for them by the author. The other side of the inventiveness of sixties fiction is the high degree of manipulation and authorial presence we encounter, which entails a depletion of life in the thing made, the story told, the character caricatured. A writer like Barth pays for his Brechtian honesty about what he's making up by a loss of vitality, until the "story" is pared down to his own witty and self-conscious voice soliloquizing about the act of creation. This imbalance between creator and artifact is an ambiguous development. Where fictional characters in the fifties can still subject life to a degree of personal control, can grow and change within the limits of their personality, the zany, two-dimensional characters in Vonnegut, Barth, Pynchon, and Heller declare not simply their authors' departure from realism but their brooding sense that life is increasingly controlled by impersonal forces. For the realist of the fifties, character is destiny; for the comic-apocalyptic writer, destiny turns character into a joke. For the fifties writer, history is remote and irrelevant compared to what Updike calls "private people and their minute concerns"; for the sixties writer, history is absurd but it can kill you. Books like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22* do not slowly gravitate towards death like straightforward novels with unhappy endings. Because of their peculiar structure—in which everything is foreshadowed, everything happens at once—they are drenched in death on all sides, like an epidemic that breaks out everywhere at the same time. Thanks to the time-scheme of Heller's book characters seem perpetually a-dying and reappearing—quite a joke—so that we're shocked when they finally do disappear, one by one, each with his own mock individuality, each to his utterly depersonalizing fate. And the Army stands for fate or necessity itself; it's a machine not for fighting or killing but solely for devouring its own.

Contradicting this pessimism, however, which sees individual life as manipulated and controlled from without, is the high degree of artistic power and license that goes into achieving this effect. If the sense of impotence and fatality in these novels expresses one side of the sensibility of the sixties, their creative exuberance and originality points to another: something crucial to the radicalism of the period, the belief that old molds can be broken and recast, a sense that reality can be reshaped by the creative will. In their inventiveness and plasticity these books are the fictional equivalent of utopian thinking. This is why we must distinguish between verbal black humorists, such as Terry Southern, Bruce Jay Friedman, and even Philip Roth, whose basic unit is the sick joke or the stand-up monologue, and what I would call "structural" black humorists, such as Heller, Pynchon, and Vonnegut. The former take apart the well-made novel and substitute nothing but the absurdist joke, the formless tirade, the cry in the dark; the latter tend toward overarticulated forms, insanely comprehensive plots (the paradox that is more than verbal, that seems inherent in the nature of things). Both kinds of black humorists are making an intense assertion of self—the former directly, the latter in vast structures of self-projection—in the face of the prevailing forces of depersonalization and external control.

All black humor involves the unseemly, the forbidden, the exotic, or the bizarre. Céline shatters the class-bound complacencies of accepted literary language with argot and street-slang, bringing the novel away from high-cultural norms and closer to living speech. His fulminations express the native cynicism of the common man, especially the marginal man of the lower middle class, who knows in his gut that all ideals are a crock of shit. He speaks for the prickly, impossible individual with all his prejudices intact, whom mass society and monopoly capitalism are always threatening to grind under, but who somehow manages to look out for Number One. Black humor always plays Falstaff to the conventional novel's Hotspur or Prince Hal. Whether it stresses the nether functions of the body, as in Henry Miller, or simply the nether side of all sentimentalities and idealizations, as in Nathanael West, or even the perverse, as with Nabokov's *Lolita*, or *Portnoy's Complaint*, black humor is always affronting taboos, giving offense, recalling people to their gut functions and gut reactions. (That such cynicism conceals its own senti-

mentalities, that it's the obvious mark of the disappointed sentimentalist, we hardly need emphasize.) Thus black humor became an aspect of the libertarian, idol-shattering side of the sixties. Books like *Portnoy's Complaint* and Mailer's *Why Are We In Vietnam?* could never have been published before the sixties; two decades earlier the language of Mailer's first novel had to be censored for publication, despite its army milieu. Both Mailer and Roth, like all young writers, had been taught to imitate their literary betters; like so many others, both seized on the sixties as a moment for letting go, with predictably mixed results—breakthroughs don't allow for guarantees.

Eventually things reached the point, in serious writing as in pornography, where scarcely any taboos were left to be assaulted. This revealed the intrinsic limitation of the "breakthrough" conceived entirely in terms of subject matter and *épatisme*, without benefit of new discoveries about life or new departures in form. As Susan Sontag once wrote, apropos of a play by Edward Albee:

What is wrong with Albee's work—or Tennessee Williams', for that matter, is not the emphasis on freakishness, sexual perversion, or the like. It is the insincere, shallow use of this material. The perverse situations are not really probed. They are used, rather, as a conventional device for shocking an audience. . . . [T]he only real shocks in art are those that pertain to form. The real shocks, which the American theater lacks, are those of a bold image carried to the point of a genuine sensuous assault upon the audience. *Partisan Review* (Winter 1964)

With few taboos left, the older mold of the novel broken but not recast, the verbal black humorists fell quickly into decadence and self-imitating excess. *Lolita* was followed by *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, *Portnoy's Complaint* by *Our Gang*, *The Breast* and *The Great American Novel*. The last of these books is especially indicative of one of the weakest tendencies of black humor. Tossed into its negligible plot is an amazing assortment of dwarfs, cripples, freaks, and grotesques—with a few women thrown in as "slits"—far beyond the ripest excesses of Southern Gothic. Many of these "characters" are casually assigned to monstrous kinds of deformity and death in the course of the book, and by the end their whole world, a baseball league, collapses apocalyptically in ruins. We have a duty to inquire, as Mark

Shechner does in a recent essay on Roth (*Partisan Review*, # 3, 1974), what unexamined impulses of aggression and sadistic cruelty have gone into the making of this type of "humor." By contrast, the earlier breakthrough book, *Portnoy's Complaint*, really does use black humor, psychoanalysis, fantasy, and even lyricism to explore a real novelistic subject, which combines sex, Jewishness, growing up, morality, and the "family romance." After *Portnoy* Roth seems to have imagined that he had found a quite different formula, that a stand-up routine of bad taste and exaggeration were enough in themselves, without any deep personal engagement or formal effort.

The black humorists are generally strong in fantasy, and Roth is unusual among them—much closer to the writers of the fifties—in his inability to fantasticize materials from outside his own experience. But Roth's post-*Portnoy* books do have a typical end-of-the-sixties quality in their gratuitous violence and desperate, but unearned, extremity. They belong to what we might call the Weatherman phase of recent literature, when the utopian hopes of an earlier moment turned sour, when some of the would-be free spirits were driven to such a pitch of frustration and intense desperation that they lost touch with reality. There had been such a thread, though minor, in the politics of the period from the beginning, and even moreso in the literature. As Blake made clear in his "Proverbs of Hell," liberation finds its necessary limits only through excess, not by way of caution and prudent restraint. But the verbal black humorists test the limits of exaggeration as a useful literary strategy. Thus the later stories in Malamud's *Pictures of Fidelman* push the schlemiel character into a masochistic comedy of humiliation that is genuinely unpleasant to read. A writer like Terry Southern is often crass and trivial, except in rare moments like the last pages of *The Magic Christian*, where his imagination brings off an apocalyptic fantasy of large comic proportions. At the bottom of the barrel are novels like Bruce Jay Friedman's *The Dick*, where there is no imagination at all, where instead of imagination the novelist offers up his most rancid prejudices and adolescent twitches, from a repulsive racism to a sophomoric back-alley lechery, all in the name of shock and bad taste. Even a fine writer's writer like Stanley Elkin, who can be terribly subtle in the rhythms of his language, tends to be gross in his emotional tone—hysterical and overwrought in a way that's unbearable because it's

so unmodulated. The Dostoevskian extremism and desperation of Jewish black humor is hard to keep under control, even when it's deeply felt; sincerity is not enough. It's a rare book like Bellow's *Herzog* or *Humboldt's Gift* where this frantic quality justifies and fulfills itself, by serving its subject and allowing for emotional nuance. Herzog's letters especially enable Bellow to move from a merely private and psychological case to the redefinition of a whole cultural period (an ambition that boomerangs disastrously in the rank, embittered pages of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*).

Failure to make such connections is what defeats a great deal of the verbal black humor of the sixties, which makes only a marginal advance on the personal novel of the previous decade. It alters the tone of the fifties novel without expanding its horizons. It brilliantly exploits vulgar, "pop" material, often with sexual audacity, and sometimes achieves a rollicking, exuberant comic tone. But with the exception of a few books like *Portnoy's Complaint* it rarely stakes out new social or fictional territory. It partakes of the liberated spirit of the sixties but rarely does much that's constructive with its new-found freedom. Quite the opposite is true of the writers I've called "structural" in their black humor. Construction is their strong point, mazes of plot, astoundingly complex fictional textures reminiscent of Joyce, Kafka, Borges, and Beckett—though sometimes we may wonder to what point all the energy of formal invention. These writers make a much sharper break with the private world of the fifties novel. Characteristically, like Pynchon, they reinvent an older literary form, the historical novel, which had descended into a moribund popular genre (the costume novel), or, like Vonnegut, they do devious and inspired take-offs on topical materials, such as the Eichmann and Abel cases in *Mother Night*, right-wing lunatic groups in *Mother Night* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, Caribbean dictatorships, the Bomb, and the end of the world in *Cat's Cradle*, the politics and philanthropy of the Rockefeller family in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, all sorts of politics in the stories in Donald Barthelme's *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, and so on. In other words, these writers of the sixties rediscover the historical world, the public world—even as they are deeply skeptical of it—just as the sixties in general rediscover the joys and horrors of politics, even as many feel poisoned by it.

Like many of the activists of the sixties, the key writers, whatever

their feeling for politics, held a profoundly ironic and adversary view of the historical process. Typically, "progressive" literature is muck-raking literature: a ferreting out of abuses so that the system can function according to its original ideals. Sixties literature, on the contrary, has an anxious, dead-end feeling about history, a paranoid fear about how it all holds together, a restless bafflement before the puzzle and complexity of it all. One way this attitude gets expressed is in the mock-historical novel, such as Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*, Berger's *Little Big Man*, and one or two of the historical sections of Pynchon's *V.*, chapters which read like pure Camp. Rather than finding a form of their own to express this sense of historical irony, these books or sections settle for pastiche or anti-novel, for tongue-in-cheek imitation of an earlier genre, such as the eighteenth-century picaresque novel, the Wild West novel, or the international spy novel. Without developing their own sense of history, they merely parrot or parody the historical sense of the books they attach themselves to. Though they are loving recreations, the Barth and Berger books especially miss the robust spirit of the forms they imitate and settle for an easy if not dismissive irony. Though highly indicative of the new feeling for history that followed the private concerns of the fifties, and full of a kind of imagination alien to the fifties, they are basically a literature of latecomers to the feast of the muses, what Barth himself once called a "literature of exhaustion," of self-consciousness: "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author."

In the pages that follow I'd like to look more closely at the work of Heller, Pynchon, and Vonnegut, and especially at two representative black-humor novels of the early sixties, *Catch-22* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. These books are neither antiquarian nor excessively literary; in a complex way they develop a striking and unusual sense of history that in the end tells us less about history than about the cultural tone of the period when they were written. Vonnegut and Heller return to World War II not for purposes of historical recreation, not simply because it was their own great formative experience, and certainly not to provide the vicarious thrills of the conventional war novel. Rather, it's because the unsolved moral enigma of that period and that experience most closely expresses the conundrum of contemporary life fifteen years later. Earlier writers had been able to approach World

War II with a certain moral simplicity; here after all was a “just war” if there ever was one. But after fifteen more years of continuous cold war and the shadow of thermonuclear war, all war seemed morally ambiguous if not outright insane; in the prolonged state of siege the whole culture seemed edged with insanity. With that special prescience that novelists sometimes have, *Catch-22*, though published in 1961, anticipates the moral nausea of the Vietnam war, even famously anticipates the flight of deserters to neutral Sweden. Similarly Vonnegut in *Mother Night* chooses a morally ambiguous double-agent as his “hero,” just as he writes about the problematic Allied bombing of Dresden rather than a Nazi atrocity in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Like Pynchon, but in a different way, both Vonnegut and Heller are interested in international intrigue; they marvel at the zany and unpredictable personal element at work or play within the lumbering forces of history. Heller’s Milo Minderbinder is a satire not simply on the American capitalist entrepreneur but also on the international wheeler-dealer, whose amoral machinations, so hilarious at first, become increasingly sombre, ugly and deadly—like so much else in the book—so that we readers become implicated in our own earlier laughter. Yet Milo is particularly close to the book’s hero Yossarian: the two understand each other. They share an ethic of self-interest which in Yossarian comes close to providing the book’s moral. As in Céline, it’s all a crock: look out for Number One. In the figure of Milo the book and its protagonist confront their seamy underside, a hideous caricature of their own values.

This doubling effect is typical of works of structural black humor. In the historical plot of *V.* the central character is called Stencil, and one key structural element is the pairing of fathers and sons—Hugh Godolphin and Evan Godolphin, Sidney Stencil and Herbert Stencil. The younger Stencil’s quest for V., which is also a search for parents and identity, is an attempt to decipher a history whose meaning is encoded in the fragmentary remains of previous histories and earlier generations. Hence the striking resemblance between *V.* and the oedipal detective novels that Ross Macdonald has been writing since *The Galton Case* in 1959. In Macdonald the mysteries of the present are always solved by decoding the past; there’s an abundance of missing parents, traumatized children, and buried corpses that have been mouldering for a generation. In late novels like *The Under-*

ground Man these Oedipal tangles are doubled and redoubled into a plot of appalling complexity, even repetitiveness, so that individual identity pales—it becomes hard to keep track of the characters or to separate them, and the solution comes to interest the author far less than the obsessive mesh of parallel relationships. In *V.* the detective Herbert Stencil is himself a cipher (as his name implies), who merely organizes an immense range of partial perspectives into one large diagram, a pattern of possible coherence and meaning. But where detective novels really do deliver a final secret that solves and abolishes all puzzles—Edmund Wilson objected that “this secret is nothing at all” compared to the preceding mystery—Pynchon is a modernist who leaves open the possibility that this final solution may be a mirage . . . a mirage or a shocking confirmation of a plot-ridden and mysteriously overorganized world.

The doubling and proliferation in the plot of these novels—which approaches a point of surfeit, even nausea, in the dense, choked pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*—always points to an ambiguity of identity, to mysterious correspondences behind the plenitude of the world's surfaces. In Pynchon the ambiguity is historical, ontological: who am I, where do I come from, who's pulling my strings, how can I wrench some meaning from my hieroglyphic surroundings? In Vonnegut the ambiguity is moral: what's the relation within Howard W. Campbell, Jr., the double agent who is the protagonist in *Mother Night*, between the writer, the lover, the Nazi propagandist and the American spy? Vonnegut himself tells us that the moral of the story (“the only story of mine whose moral I know”) is that “we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be.”

What makes Vonnegut appeal so much to adolescents is probably a certain adolescent pessimism and moral absolutism, a modern *Weltschmerz*, which often threatens to reduce complex human problems to simple dichotomies, easy formulas. This is especially true when he speaks in his own person, in essays, prefaces, and interviews, where the mask of the wise simpleton quickly becomes cloying. But in the novels something else happens. Simplicity of statement begins to have a quite different function. The manner becomes flat and factual, the chapters very brief, like the *précis* of an action rather than a full-scale novelization. Descriptive and psychological texture are

reduced to mere notation, the action to pure plot, and the plot proliferates to a high degree of complexity, taking amazing twists and turns which double back on each other. Like most writers attracted to science fiction, Vonnegut has a precise, logical turn of mind; he loves to scatter the action in twenty separate strands, some of them quite fantastic, only to loop them all neatly together at the end. In this he resembles the genre-writer or the traditional writer of well-made plots more than a modernist addicted to problematic and open-ended forms. But Vonnegut crowds the three-decker story into a book the length of a novella, so that the emphasis on plot and incident, on Aristotelian changes of fortune, becomes overwhelming. (This is especially true of *Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle*, his strongest books, which both belong to the early sixties.)

The overall effect of this is to alter subtly our sense of reality, at least as we read the book. Despite the promiscuous mixture of fact and fantasy, the effect of the flat, declarative manner and the simple-man persona is to give the narrator a sort of man-to-man reliability in the mind of the reader. Also, it puts everything in the story on the same plane: the most bizarre events seem more matter-of-fact, while flat-out realities take on a slight glow of lunacy that they would genuinely have if we weren't so inured to them. The Jewish writers of the fifties were drawn to extreme emotional states; they saw life's problems and glories as located in the self. A writer like Vonnegut is drawn to extreme conditions of reality, so extreme as to have addled our minds or dulled our capacity for *any* emotional response. Perhaps under the influence of the deathcamps or the Bomb, Vonnegut and Heller are drawn to situations in which the arbitrary, the terrible, and the irrational have been *routinized*. They find it maniacally comic that men should learn to adjust to insane conditions, cultivate their private lives, go about their business.

Much of the comedy of *Catch-22* comes from the effort to maintain business-as-usual under "insane" conditions. The painstaking records the Nazis kept were perhaps rooted in the same impulse. No wonder Vonnegut and Heller became classics of the anti-Vietnam generation, curious comic bibles of protest, so different from the protest literature of the thirties, while writers like Malamud, who took the fifties posture of stoicism and endurance, or else Jamesian renunciation, gradually lost favor. Vonnegut's zany, cartoonlike

plot, his distaste for violence and heroic posturing, and his affinity for a few simple human verities help make his work the moral equivalent of the New Politics of the early sixties, which substituted communitarian good will, anarchic individualism and ethical fervor for the old staples of ideology. But at his best the ingenious reversals of Vonnegut's plots go well beyond the simple verities of his own moralizing, provide indeed as full a helping of moral ambiguity as any modernist could want.

I said earlier that characters in black humor novels tend to be cartoonlike and two-dimensional, without the capacity to grow or change. To this we must add the qualification that the protagonist is usually different: he doesn't completely belong to this mode of reality or system of representation. As Richard Poirier has suggested apropos of Pynchon, the central character of these novels moves often on a different plane: he shows at least the capacity to become a fuller, more sentient human being, a character in a realistic novel. In the first part of the book the "hero" is typically enmeshed in a system of comic repetition: tics of speech and behavior, entanglements of plot, all the "routines" of verbal black humor, life imitating vaudeville. Heller, for example, like Dickens, knows how to make his own comic technique approximate poignant human realities. And, as the comedy in *Catch-22* darkens, the system of dehumanization becomes clearer, and the central character becomes increasingly isolated in his impulse to challenge and step outside it.

In *Yossarian*, Heller introduces a new figure into postwar American fiction, descended from the schlemiel of the Jewish novel but finally an inversion of that passive and unhappy figure. Heller tells us he's an Assyrian, but only because (as he said to an interviewer) "I wanted to get an extinct culture . . . My purpose in doing so was to get an outsider, a man who was intrinsically an outsider." The typical schlemiel is certainly no hero, but like Yossarian has a real instinct for survival. In earlier days Yossarian had really tried to bomb the targets, as he was supposed to do. Now his only goal is to avoid flak, to keep alive. "Yossarian was the best man in the group at evasive action." This Yossarian is concerned only with saving his skin, obsessed by the things that threaten his life. "There were too many dangers for Yossarian to keep track of." And Heller gives us a wonderful catalogue of them, from Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo ("they all

wanted him dead’’), to all the insane and fanatical people in his own army (‘‘they wanted to kill him, too’’), to all the organs of his body, with their arsenal of fatal diseases:

There were diseases of the skin, diseases of the bone, diseases of the lung, diseases of the stomach, diseases of the heart, blood and arteries. There were diseases of the head, diseases of the neck, diseases of the chest, diseases of the intestines, diseases of the crotch. There were even diseases of the feet. There were billions of conscientious body cells oxidating away day and night like dumb animals at their complicated job of keeping him alive and healthy, and every one was a potential traitor and foe. There were so many diseases that it took a truly diseased mind to even think about them as often as he and Hungry Joe did.

Yossarian seems perilously close to the Sterling Hayden character in *Dr. Strangelove*, the general who fears that women are sapping his vital bodily fluids. The insanity of the system, in this case the army, breeds a defensive counter-insanity, a mentality of organized survival that mirrors the whole system of rationalized human waste and devaluation. The self itself becomes an army, a totalitarian body politic, demanding total vigilance against the threat of betrayal and insurrection. Each individual organ, each cell, becomes an object of paranoid anxiety.

The pattern of *Catch-22* is similar to that of *Mother Night*: a world gone mad, a protagonist caught up in the madness, who eventually steps outside it in a slightly mad way. The Sweden to which Yossarian flees at the end of the book is something of a pipe dream, a pure elsewhere. Yossarian’s friend Orr has made it there—from the Mediterranean in a rowboat!—but Orr is Yossarian’s opposite, utterly at home in the world, as idiotically free of anxiety as Yossarian is dominated by it. Orr is the unkillable imp, the irrepressible innocent, a ‘‘likable dwarf with a smutty mind and a thousand valuable skills that would keep him in a low income group all his life.’’ Orr is the gentile Crusoe to Yossarian’s Jewish neurotic; along with the diabolical Milo they form a spectrum of the possibilities of survival in extreme situations, which includes not only wartime but just about all of modern life, indeed the whole human condition, for which the war is ultimately a metaphor. But Yossarian goes through a second

change before the book ends: he becomes a troublemaker, and worse still, the unwilling keeper of the book's conscience, just as Nately's whore becomes the figure of Nemesis, the haunting, surreal spirit of female revenge for the callous inhumanity of a man-made world. The earlier Yossarian saw through the no-win bind of Catch-22 and set out monomaniacally to survive. But as each of the others goes separately, uncomplainingly, to his predictable fate, Yossarian becomes more and more the sombre registrar of their deaths and exits:

Nately's whore was on his mind, as were Kraft and Orr and Nately and Dunbar, and Kid Sampson and McWatt, and all the poor and stupid and diseased people he had seen in Italy, Egypt and North Africa and knew about in other areas of the world, and Snowden and Nately's whore's kid sister were on his conscience, too.

Yossarian has come willy-nilly to brood about more than his own inner organs. Other people have become a desperate reality to him, and with it a sense of their common fate, their mutual essence. The secret of Snowden, who spills his guts in the tail of a plane, is revealed to Yossarian alone:

His teeth were chattering in horror. He forced himself to look again. Here was God's plenty, all right, he thought bitterly as he stared—liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch. Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes. . . . He wondered how in the world to begin to save him.

"I'm cold," Snowden whispered. "I'm cold."

"There, there," Yossarian mumbled in a voice too low to be heard. "There, there."

Yossarian was cold, too, and shivering uncontrollably. . . . It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.

Impelled perhaps by the unconscious Jewish identification, Heller paraphrases the famous "humanizing" speech of Shylock. ("If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?") But the final allusion to *Lear* is breath-

taking: an impertinence to do it, the height of *chutzpah* to bring it off. The scene must be read as a whole to see how well it works—it's the penultimate moment of the book—but even the delicate texture of these pages of prose would be nothing had not the "secret" of Snowden been such an important leitmotif throughout the book. (Snowden's death had taken place before the book opened, but it's fully remembered and decoded as he lies on an operating table in the next-to-last chapter, as if its meaning, which underlies the whole book, had taken that long to be reduced to its terrifying simplicity and finality.) The sombre tome of this passage—despite the necessary farcical touch of Yossarian's dislike of stewed tomatoes—is something that's not available to verbal black humor, which aims for wild incongruities at every turn, which is more at home with disgust and humiliation and absurdity than with the simple terror of the world as it is; such a poignant effect requires a more fully human respondent, which Yossarian has by now become. Heller's "structural" use of the secret of Snowden makes it a time bomb of ineluctable tragic fact ticking away beneath the book's surface of farce and rollicking insanity; except that the secret unfolds its revelations gradually, alongside the story, until it finally *becomes* the story.

When I first read *Catch-22* I felt strongly that except for the Snowden chapter the book's final shift in tone in the last seventy-five pages didn't work, that after doing an amazing *comic* adaptation of Kafka and Dostoevsky most of the way, Heller unaccountably switched to imitating them directly in the finale, a contest he couldn't win. Rereading the book I can see why I felt that way—we miss the sheer gratuitous pleasure of the comedy—but I also see how much the sombre and even ugly side was present from the beginning, and how gradually the book modulates into it: for such laughter we have the devil to pay. The *Mr. Roberts* element won't do all the way through. I'm now sure the last section works, and makes the whole book work; up against a wall, I'd have to call *Catch-22* the best novel of the sixties.

But what can we learn about the sixties from *Catch-22*? I think the popular success of the book can be attributed to the widespread spiritual revulsion in the sixties against many of our most sacrosanct institutions, including the army; to which our leaders replied by heightening just those things which had caused the disgust in the

first place, especially the quality of fraud, illusion, and manipulation in our public life. Just as the response to war-protest was escalation and the solution to the failures of the bombing was more bombing, so the push for more honesty in public debate was met by more public relations and bigger lies. The Johnson administration's unshakable insistence that black was white, that escalation was really the search for peace, and that the war was being won, was a perfect realization of the structure of unreality and insanity that runs as a theme through both *Mother Night* and *Catch-22*. "We're all in this business of illusion together," says Doc Daneeka, who himself later suffers from the general illusion that he is dead, which, morally speaking, he is. Daneeka, whose merely physical presence is powerless to contradict his "official" demise, is destroyed as much by his own insane ethic as by the structure of unreality that is the army. When he asks Yossarian to substitute for a dead soldier whose parents are coming to see him die, he says: "As far as we're concerned, one dying boy is just as good as any other, or just as bad. . . . All you've got to do is lie there a few minutes and die a little." Surprisingly, when Yossarian does it, the parents go along:

"Giuseppe."

"It's not Giuseppe, Ma. It's Yossarian."

"What difference does it make?" the mother answered in the same mourning tone, without looking up. "He's dying."

When the whole family starts crying Yossarian cries too. It's not a show anymore. Somehow they're right, Daneeka's right, they *are* all dying; in some sense it *doesn't* matter. A piece of ghoulish humor has turned into something exceptionally moving. The same point is made with the Soldier in White, a mummy in bandages whose only sign of life is an interchange of fluids. What *is* a man, anyway, when things have come to this extremity? The ground is being readied for revealing Snowden's secret. The *Lear* theme is at the heart of the book, no mere device for concluding it.

Unlike the realistic novelists of the fifties, the black humorists suggest that besides our personal dilemmas, which often loom so large in our imagination, we all share features of a common fate, enforced by society and the general human condition. Though the quest for identity must inevitably be personal, in some sense we *are*

interchangeable. Furthermore, the quest will surely be thwarted if society becomes a vast structure of illusion and duplicity, and hence treats us as even more interchangeable and manipulable than we necessarily are. One effect of Vietnam and Watergate was that the official organs of our society lost much of the respect and credence they had commanded. Even middle Americans began to live with less of a mystified and paternalistic sense of Authority. The disillusionment and ruthless skepticism—really, spoiled idealism—of *Catch-22*, outlived the sixties to become the ever more pervasive mood. With Célinean cynics and paranoids installed in the White House, people at large became that much more cynical and paranoid themselves. And the paranoia had some base in fact, for in a highly polarized society, where the self-imposed limitations of tradition and civility have been cast away, it's likely that somebody really is out to get you, by any means fair or foul.

Yet black humor began its great efflorescence during the Kennedy years, in apparent contradiction to the idealism, optimism and high style that we like to attribute to that period. Mailer's *An American Dream* can be read as a testament about the Kennedy years, better than all the tendentious memoirs and eulogies that were published after the assassination. When I first came upon the references to Kennedy in the opening pages I thought them meretricious: one more piece of megalomania for Mailer to associate his all-too-Mailerian hero with the dashing, fallen President. But Mailer's identification with Kennedy had come much earlier and ran much deeper. His first major piece of journalism had been about Kennedy's nomination. A would-be courtier and counselor, he'd addressed a whole book of essays to Kennedy as President. Sexually rivalrous, he'd written an open letter to Jackie, half-scolding her but implicitly trying to woo her away. Like others, Mailer saw Kennedy as some kind of union of style and power—both Irish and Harvard, moneyed and macho—whose classy imperial court had a use for the arts. But in the novel his hero Rojack complains that

The real difference between the President and myself may be that I ended with too large an appreciation of the moon, for I looked down the abyss on the first night I killed: four men, four very separate Germans, dead under a full moon—whereas Jack, for all I know, never saw the abyss.

Recall the premise that Kennedy and Rojack are alter egos, both war heroes, both elected to Congress in the same year. But Rojack has explored the nether side of violence and power, explores it in the whole book, coming out only “something like sane again” in the last line. The book’s plot can be seen as an enactment of his fantasies, his irrationalities, his madness. Walking along the parapet of a skyscraper to prove his courage and manhood, he hears voices that tell him he can fly. The whole book is steeped in magic and dread, the dark underside of a too-purely Apollonian Kennedy vision of power without price or penalty. Rojack is not Mailer but rather Mailer’s ambiguous self-portrait as an archetype of the age. Only the best writers have the gift of using the accidents of their own experience, the stuff of their fantasy life, in that significant way, and we can hardly blame the book’s first readers, myself included, who were still under the sway of Camelot’s idealized Apollonian self-image, for seeing bad taste and confessional self-aggrandizement in its allusions to both Kennedy and the author’s own recent bad-boy history.

Today time allows us quite another perspective on that period and its literature. From *Catch-22*, *Mother Night* and *V.* to *Cat’s Cradle*, *Little Big Man* and *An American Dream*, the black humor novels of the first half of the sixties, even when conceived earlier, are like a secret history of the Kennedy years, when the terrifying specter of thermonuclear war flared garishly one last time before beginning to dim, when fond hopes for building a better society were repeatedly mocked by our inability to deal with the society we have, when a President’s civilized, cosmopolitan vision helped conceal the expansion of our imperial role. Pynchon and Heller, like Mailer and Berger, are the first novelists of a new imperial America, even when they write about World War II, that just war, or about German Southwest Africa, or the Fashoda crisis of the 1880’s (which neatly foreshadows the Suez crisis of the 1950’s), or about the political machinations of Argentine exiles in Florence in 1902. *V.* especially is a novel whose wide-ranging imagination, strongly influenced by European novelists of imperialism like Conrad and Graham Greene, peculiarly parallels America’s new world role. Just as *An American Dream* is ambivalent towards power—sexual power, political power, American power—*V.* is ambivalent toward history, seeing it on the one hand as having an exhilarating if frighteningly comprehensive shape and design, but seeing

it also as perhaps a fraud, an illusion, the ultimate unreality compared to the individual's humblest private need.

The early sixties was itself an ambiguous period, for like these novels it did really have an exuberant and expansive side that was not mere Camelot rhetoric. A nascent civil rights movement, then still in its hand-in-hand, "We Shall Overcome" mood, was translating the stirrings of the Court into direct action. A nascent New Left, humanistic in its values, spontaneous and American in its methods, but potentially radical in its goals, seemed determined to avoid the ideological rigidity and conspiratorial mentality of the Old. In Beat poetry and the new vogue of folk music these social movements found their artistic accompaniments, as poets and folksingers reached past the academic insularity and pop commercialism of the fifties, towards the cultural side of the left-wing heritage of the thirties, the populism of the Popular Front.

But the opening up of the novel was a deeper, more ambiguous development, and I think it revealed more about the changing sensibility of the early sixties. Grandiose and experimental in form, these books partook of the imperial buoyancy of the Kennedy years. But their vision sometimes had a bleak, dead-end character that belied any official optimism. *Catch-22* had a plastic creative freedom and energy hardly present in the novels of the fifties, but it imagines a world wholly unredeemed by rational purpose or humanistic uplift. A similar ambiguity attaches to the theme of paranoia and the vision of history in Pynchon's novels. On one hand his form and language, his historical range and complexity of plot match Heller in creative exuberance, and many in his endless cast of cartoonish characters are pure products of the comic or satiric spirit. Even his paranoid theme has its exhilarating side: it enables him to make astonishing connections and fantasize breathtaking possibilities, to subvert and intimidate our pedestrian sense of reality and causation, "to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (as Oedipa Maas muses). "*Shall I project a world?*" Oedipa asks herself in *The Crying of Lot 49*, situating herself neatly somewhere between the novelist and the psychotic. She is neither, but the elaborate plot that her sleuthing gradually intuits makes for a novel that's both impressively somber in tone and yet amazingly conditional and tentative in substance. For those who entirely associate black humor with apocalyptic farce and a

tone of raucous extremity *The Crying of Lot 49* should come as a revelation. *V.* embodies more of the positive side of the paranoid vision, with its immense assortment of characters, plots, historical periods, and narrative modes, all spun together into a dazzling web of possible meanings—which still don't measure up to the pleasure of the telling, the joy of imaginative construction, where the paranoid and the novelist *do* come together. But in the spare, perfectly controlled novella that Pynchon wrote next, *Oedipa*, the heroine, imagines a vast plot that the author mostly doesn't care to enact. *Lot 49* is *about* plotting, and *Oedipa* is less the projector than the object, the possible victim. Herbert Stencil, the sleuth of *V.*, is an eccentric bird in search of his own identity, who in the process happens to construct an immense historical mosaic. Himself nothing, Stencil could only become; but since the cartoon of history is enough for him, he probably won't. But *Oedipa Maas*, despite her piquant Pynchonesque name, has the pulse of a full-blooded woman. The California cartoon-world that surrounds her can't possibly satisfy her, but the richer baroque underworld she glimpses won't necessarily do so either. It might be a way out, but not to anything better. The ambiguity of history in *V.*—does it have no meaning or too much meaning? Is it a chaos of random hints or a tightly organized totalitarian web?—becomes the more direct subject of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In trying to sort out the estate of the late Pierce Inverarity, *Oedipa* gets in a classic double-bind, which eventually comes to represent reality itself, particularly the American reality. Either *Oedipa* has stumbled onto an immense plot—or into an immense hoax—which has the “secret richness and concealed density of dream” but also a dreamlike pointlessness and ineffectuality. Or else there is nothing, no “real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise in life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know,” nothing but the official surfaces of life, the “lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty.” *Oedipa* hopes none of these things is true. “She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was.” Either no exit, or an exit into rich but unhinging, even appalling realities, or perhaps an exit into madness, clinical paranoia, inner space.

It's astonishing how well the book locates itself on this narrow shelf of ambiguity, this edge of contingency, beautifully epitomized in a small moment when *Oedipa* comes upon what looks like an

ordinary trash can, hand-painted with the initials W.A.S.T.E. "She had to look closely to see the periods between the letters." It's a witty touch, for those tiny periods flickering near the vanishing-point could mean nothing at all, but might also make all the difference between a simple trash can and a system of secret communication going back centuries; she may have stumbled into the dense underbrush of a hidden reality, something she might have uncovered "anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if she'd only looked." "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth."

It should be clear why Pynchon's paranoid myth makes some claim on us, without demanding that we be paranoid ourselves, or give any credence to the reality of V. or the Tristero System. Pynchon's paranoia is neither a clinical paranoia nor a literal paranoid view of history, but instead a metaphor for something the novelist shares with the mystic, the drug-taker, the philosopher, and the scientist: a desperate appetite for meaning, a sense at once joyful and threatening that things are not what they seem, that reality is mysteriously overorganized and can be decoded if only we attend to the hundred innocent hints and byways that beckon to us, that life is tasteless and insipid without this hidden order of meaning but perhaps appalling *with* it.

Without farce or violence, Pynchon's paranoia reveals an alienation from American life greater than that of Heller or any other comic-apocalyptic writer. Society commands no loyalty in *Lot 49*, though the freaked-out scene of California in the sixties evokes an anthropological fascination; the rest is a tissue of falsehood and spiritual deadness. The drifter ambience of *V.*, which Pynchon himself has evidently continued to live out, has ripened in good sixties fashion into a complete rejection of official cant and the square world. Pynchon's sensibility, like that of some of the earlier Beat figures (whom he resembles in many ways, not including his highly structured style of writing, and his aversion to personal publicity), foreshadowed strikingly the mood of young people in the late sixties. For them, paranoia, like radicalism, drug-taking, and communal life, was both a rejection of the official culture and a form of group solidarity, promising a more fully authentic life-possibility.

For Pynchon the paranoid imagination is a special way of rebelling or dropping out, but it's also more than that. He compares it to a hallucinogenic drug. For him it rends the veil of life's banal and numbing surfaces, putting him in touch with something more deep and rich, which may also unfortunately be quite unreal. Above all it makes him feel more fully alive, with a more intense and absolute self than the official rational culture dares allow. It's "a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshares." It's also analogous to the powerful sentiment of being that marks certain religious experiences: "the saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself. . . ." It's important that Oedipa herself does not really have such an experience, only a glimmering and conditional intimation of it. Her mind trembles and is unfurrowed, but down to the end she passively receives these intimations and continues to weigh and judge them, caught in her double bind:

Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.

Evidently Pynchon is tempted to romanticize Oedipa into a figure of rebellion, just as he briefly inflates Pierce Inverarity's "legacy" into an allegory of America; but this is not where the book is really impressive. In the final scene Oedipa, "with the courage you find you have when there is nothing more to lose," prepares to make a final gesture to expose the Tristero secret. But she's far from a heroic figure, only—like Yossarian, like most of Vonnegut's heroes—a modest center of value in a world where human values have been misplaced or forgotten; she's caught between two worlds, the conventional and the paranoid, that have each gone amok in their own way. Oedipa is not simply the drifter and the bumbling amateur sleuth on loan from *V*. She grows more real and human as the book proceeds, trying to make

connections but more impressive in her quiet despair and sexual *dis*-connection, a mood that heightens gradually into a sense of apocalyptic foreboding. What really moves us in *Lot 49* is not the paranoid myth itself—we care almost as little about the Tristero System as about the plot of the impossibly elaborate Jacobean play Pynchon parodies—but rather the state of mind, the rhythm of perception it makes possible. The big novels of the early sixties really do belong to the expansive, world-projecting mood of that period. *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1966, already anticipates the more sombre expectations of the late sixties, when paranoia gradually ceased to be an ecstatic enlargement of the possibilities of meaning and being, a positive subversion of ordinary reality; instead it darkened into an apocalyptic and pervasive anxiety. The paranoid became the victim of the plot or the helpless onlooker waiting to be engulfed, not the imaginative projector. If *Catch-22* foreshadows the soul-destroying madness of the Vietnam war, *The Crying of Lot 49* foreshadows the darkening green of the end of the sixties, when a government of lawless desperadoes and a half-crazed remnant of young radicals would pair off in unequal contest of mutual paranoia, helping to destroy each other and confirming also Delmore Schwartz's much-quoted adage that "even paranoids have enemies."

The black humor novels of the sixties are not only deeply interested in history but create amazing parallels to the history of their own times, less in their actual subjects than in their whole mode of imagination. The sense of incongruity and absurdity, the mixture of farce, violence, and hysteria that we find in these books, we can also find in the wars, riots, movements, assassinations, conspiracies, as well as in much subtler and less spectacular manifestations of the spirit of the sixties. The black humor novel of the sixties, like the radicalism of the sixties, and, indeed, like the American government and the architects of social policy in the sixties, began with elaborate efforts to assimilate history, to comprehend and shape it along the lines of private mythology, public planning, the enlightened will. By the end of the sixties—in both fiction and reality—this was displaced by a sense that history was out of control, or that the Others had their hands on the wheel, and were preparing to do us in completely. By the end of the sixties paranoia was the last fuel for direct action, the last gasp of a coherent world-view, which soon itself collapsed into frag-

ments. "Fragments are the only forms I trust," wrote Donald Barthelme, as the influence of the more titanic modernists like Joyce gave way to such inspired miniaturists as Kafka and Borges, negative visionaries whose work undercut all mythic inclusiveness. In late-sixties writers like Barthelme or Wurlitzer the sense of disconnection is complete, as it is in the Weatherman phase of sixties radicalism, where futility and frustration spawn random violence. Barthelme and Wurlitzer write as if they were surrounded by the curious artifacts of an extinct culture, which they plunder like collectors, or stroll past vacantly like sleepwalkers.

Alain Touraine

FROM CRISIS TO CRITIQUE

EDITORS' NOTE: *Alain Touraine's piece is part of a continuing series of comments on the political and economic crisis in America and Western Europe.*

Talking about crisis is usually a way of reassuring oneself. We check the indicators: prices and unemployment are up . . . the trade deficit is worse due to the increase in oil prices. But isn't all that a matter of coincidence? We carefully avoid discussing the context for these concerns and expectations—the nature of a particular kind of society. The only permissible question is how long this particular aberration will last. When will the indicators turn favorable again? Questions about the kind of society we have and how to change it are out of order.

We therefore have to stop talking about crisis and begin asking a very different question: are our society and culture and international power relationships changing so drastically that we have to learn to live in a world as different from the one we've been familiar with as the "black country" of the Industrial Revolution in England was from the "green country"?

It is essential that we describe and understand how a new culture, a new society, a new politics comes into being, and that effort requires that we reexamine not only the workings of political economy but the very categories in which we organize our thought and lives. I shall not be doing that here, but I cannot talk about crisis without first remarking that crisis must be viewed not from the perspective of the past but in relation to the future. There isn't a crisis just because the old system no longer functions as well as it once did; there is a crisis if we are incapable of entering into a new culture,

a new society, a new political situation.

If we keep this in mind, the notion of crisis takes on another meaning. If the future is to be born, the old order must be broken up, and a crisis must undermine those capacities, privileges, and ideologies which sustain a blind and conservative power. Such a crisis is ambiguous because a breakdown of the old order does not automatically guarantee development of new forces; but it is a necessary crisis, because to the degree that the old order can compel acceptance of its legitimacy, it can obstruct necessary changes.

During the past two decades the image projected by the United States has been that of a power mobilizing its institutions with a remarkable ability to unify its population and to respond to the national will. It corresponded to the traditional notion of a *civilization*: an intertwining of culture, institutions, and political order. The same image could have been applied, though with more reservations, to the Soviet Union, which also presented itself as a powerful state mobilizing an extremely well integrated society and a specific culture. In both cases, the image has always been open to criticism and has always had its limitations. Nonetheless, the official image of the Soviet Union has been that of a distinct historical entity endowed with political capacity, the mechanisms necessary for social integration, and a progressive culture—that is to say, one directed toward the great task of industrialization. Similarly, the United States, especially when viewed from the outside, appeared undeniably to be an integrated society—that is, one in which the predominant way of life, the functioning of political institutions, and economic and military power seemed individual elements of a single totality: American civilization.

As a result, in both societies cults came into being around the central social groups—clearly the middle class in the United States, and even more clearly the Party members and elite workers in the Soviet Union. At the same time, there emerged a certain moralism, as well as an appeal to social integration and civic virtue—all this heightened by an acute awareness of belonging to a society that is both making and defending progress.

These observations would have been incomprehensible a few

years ago, although they refer to what was a daily, evident, unquestioned experience for the majority of Americans. (I cannot be so certain in the case of the Soviet Union.) We Europeans have many reasons to sympathize in this situation: in our childhood we accepted as self-evident the existence of English, French, even (for those of us who grew up before Nazism) German civilization. But for a long time now, these ideologies concealing the power of a few have been under attack. Today, we know that the terms have lost all meaning: of course, specific traits of Western society and culture exist in Great Britain, or France, or Germany, but none of these countries can be considered an historic totality formed by the congruence of political and military powers, economic decisions, and cultural behavior. In France, De Gaulle could assert a political will only when he spoke in his own name, rather than in the name of French society. In Germany, economic power is linked with an almost total absence of that nation from the realm of international politics.

The same crisis of order and hegemony afflicting these ideologies affects the United States, but in a different way; and if we were better informed or more attentive, we would discover that it affects the Soviet Union just as deeply. America is the more interesting case, although the Soviet situation is equally important. The United States has long defined itself in terms of movement and progress rather than in terms of a powerfully integrating political order and ideology. The country's capacity for cultural innovation, social controversy, and institutionalized negotiation of disputes remains strong despite the growing power of government apparatus and conservative ideologies. As a result, it is in the United States that the crisis of order has the best chance of encouraging cultural innovation, social conflict, and modes of expression and conduct which might characterize the new society to which I referred when I began.

The crisis of the American order might be interpreted as a disintegration of American society, but it might also constitute re-discovery of the social reality concealed behind layers of ideological encrustation. One would like to be able to say something similar regarding the crisis of Soviet society, caught up as it is in a self-justifying rhetoric and a strict set of categories which serve to repress cultural innovations as well as social and political conflicts. Indeed, mustn't we go further and hope that this crisis of the dominant

civilizations accelerates—this crisis of all the military, political, social, and cultural blocs which are on the verge of being reduced to nothing more than tools of dangerous power politics. Would that the empires might decline, so that social and cultural change could progress over the whole planet instead of being crushed by rival imperialisms!

But let us go on to consider a contradictory thesis. The break-up of political systems and ideological apparatuses which conceal real power relationships may liberate forces of change, innovation, and conflict. But it might also result in fragmented society with only limited options and defenses against the impersonal power of the massive economic organizations. Crisis is good if it breaks up the established order; it is disastrous if it destroys the capacity for collective action and the will to create and direct a society. The more widespread the popular participation in economic, political, and cultural exchanges, the less important the state's mediating role becomes, and the deeper the participatory process penetrates toward the base of society. The crisis of the national state on the European model is therefore salutary, and it ought to make possible further progress in extending democracy. Everywhere, political life is spreading beyond government institutions, through labor unions, community organizations, and voluntary association. (It is important not to confuse this progress towards self-governing democracy with the subordination of local populations and collectivities by the multinational corporations, and by a new empire replacing the old national states.)

More and more, social and cultural life is being organized in closer coordination with lived experience: on the job; in the particular region; on the basis of ethnic identity; and even on the basis of age or sex—those elements of experience furthest removed from the institution of the state. On the other hand, political power recedes further and further from each of us as individuals. Today we talk about economics as if we were talking about the weather, as if the forces on the loose were utterly impersonal and we just had to wait for the good weather to follow the storm.

It is not enough to demand new freedoms and to dream about the withering away of the state. We have to face the state's new role, which has less to do with integration than it did in the past, and more

to do with domination: it has become an instrument of power rather than of order; a mobilizer of resources, a manipulator of privileges, feelings, and political support.

Americans had grown to accept the idea that the state was just one element of the political system, in keeping with Montesquieu's philosophy of the separation of the three powers. The state was only the executive branch; the President was elected and the Congress carried the people's will to the highest level of authority. Last year in Boston, as I watched the proceedings of the House Judiciary Committee regarding the question of impeachment, I had the impression that America was once again reliving, almost as in a dream, this political philosophy. The people, through their representatives, asserted their sovereignty and condemned the guilty Prince.

Yet who can believe that the state is only the executive branch? Participation in two World Wars, intervention—often direct—against national liberation movements in Latin America and elsewhere, the rivalry with the Soviet Union, and above all the war against Vietnam and Cambodia have endowed the United States with a state both national and imperial in its character. The traditional leaders (subordinated to the state whose political and military engagement in Vietnam would insure its omnipotence) waged a campaign against it as soon as they could. They won a battle, but they lost the war.

The leading citizens and the old mechanisms of representation cannot lead to victory against this power of the state, since they themselves are more and more closely associated with it. A nationwide democratic consciousness must be formed—a determination to give to the people the ability to act against the ruling elites. In the United States, at least as much as in European countries, the power structures have succeeded in fragmenting and dispersing their adversaries.

A crisis of order may, therefore, make possible a great leap forward for democracy, a flourishing of representative institutions and a recovery of more direct accountability. But, much more immediately,

it shows how powerless people are when they are subject to economic and military structures utterly beyond their reach. Isn't this the same thing we see in an extreme form in the Soviet Union: a brutal disjunction of the central military, political, and economic apparatus from lived experience, whether that is embodied in intellectual and artistic expression, religious experience, national consciousness in this multinational state, or sufferings compounded by repression. Wherever the power of industrial societies asserts itself, the most fundamental conflict is between the centralized structures and what I propose to call the territories—meaning by that both experience lived collectively and desire for democratic control. The national idea thus takes on an entirely new meaning: it doesn't mean wishing back the national state of Richelieu or Peter the Great but involves instead a struggle against a crumbling away of democracy which suits the large power structures only too well. It means calling forth new forms of collective control over the instruments of economic and military power.

No one can be content to assert his identity, whether as an individual or as a member of a community, without being concerned about the monsters that dominate the history of our planet. It is unacceptable today to limit our demands to the cultural crisis, when political, economic, and military power have never been more concentrated, nor demonstrated more brutally their capacity for crushing peoples than in Vietnam and Czechoslovakia. There is not an important social movement today which does not seek to restore to the communities themselves control over the decisions that govern their lives. We still live with a sense of powerlessness—sometimes resigned, sometimes in complicity—in the face of the frigid monsters holding the weapons and the money. The gravest crisis experienced by our privileged societies is the collective loss of historical responsibility. Like domestic pets subject to masters who feed them better and better and teach them to dance, the peoples of the affluent world are no longer attracted by the vision of building a future. The intellectual rationalizations that conceal this loss of hope hardly matter. Historical movement conceived only as strategy or technical program without meaning or direction is the very essence of

decadence. The privileged part of our planet enjoys its domination—sometimes in good, sometimes in bad conscience—but does not dare take responsibility for a future that hangs on the decisions of military staffs and economic power blocs.

Following the Industrial Revolution, first in England and then on the Continent, there gradually developed a movement for social control and economic activity that combined revolutionary movement and pressure for reform. In the name of socialism or of industrial democracy the violence of capitalist exploitation was attacked and partially restrained. Now we seem to have arrived at a point where power and profit dominate society—in new ways, but ways which are just as savage. We must choose between barbarism and a renewed collective control over the structures that govern a society, a control once again predicated upon both a revolutionary thrust and a program of reforms. Our present crisis arises from our having believed, during the years of easy affluence and triumphant imperialism, that we could create a new culture that prized diversity, new forms of personal identity and social relations, without making a broad direct assault against the centers of power and without creating any collective program for the future. The moment has come to abandon the defensive positions and to assume the responsibility for the counteroffensive.

Today it is difficult to maintain the myth of a middle class or of good citizens who serve as an influence for stability and integration. What is left of this comforting image in the Soviet Union when the victims of repression and their friends are placed on one side, and the torturers, informers, and their accomplices on the other? Can we convince ourselves that only exiles practiced torture in Algeria, when we know that it was practiced without debate by many French officers and soldiers as well? Dare we condemn the war against Vietnam without condemning everything in American society and culture that made the barbarity possible?

We see violence everywhere. It would be simpler to talk about social disorganization or anomie, but these terms are too reassuring and they are misleading. They allow us to believe that the continuity of the social order has been weakened by rapid change: the young

reject the heritage of their parents, those on the fringes of society no longer share its central values, values which no longer translate into recognized institutional norms. But the nature of the crisis is quite different. The social order is not at all disorganized; it imposes itself more brutally than ever. The centers of power penetrate social life with their destructive influences more deeply than ever. In Europe, more than in the United States, the introduction of industrial capitalism in the last century was marked by brutal proletarianization. The authoritarian organization of labor destroyed working-class culture. Today the power of the ruling class is not only felt in the work environment. There is no power without political control and especially without ideological manipulation; propaganda and advertising are everywhere at work. *There is constant talk of education; that is, cultural as well as social control.* We are all swept up by a huge pump, sucked in and forced out, summoned to participate, to play the game, to buy and to crave. But we are also put back in our place if we are naive enough to believe in equality in a mass society. Everyone should go to school; but what an error to conclude that education should equalize opportunities and standards of living; its function is the direct opposite: to legitimize inequality and domination.

The societies of the past isolated the lower classes, or shut them up within a communal culture that was much less the product of tradition than of exclusion and conquest. Today, on the other hand, everyone is invited to subordinate participation, to the glitter of consumption. Behavior marked by withdrawal or aggression, disorganization or violence is simply the counterpart of this manipulation. The objects sparkle, they lie within arm's reach and arouse desire, but we are separated from them by the shop window of inequality and institutional barriers. How could one not be tempted to break the glass and take what one wants? Withdrawal and violence, invariably associated, reveal the alienation of the working classes far more than they indicate disorganization in the established social order. The crisis does not consist in the breakdown of traditions, but in the obstacles that prevent conflict and the organization of social and political protest. We must choose, not between integration and crisis, but between crisis and conflict—between acceptance of the normal

conflict of interests and plans to be found in any society—and a one-sided vision that perceives things only from the rulers' point of view and deplors that society as a whole does not yield to their interests and the case which they present.

Isn't the difficulty of forming social and political movements one of the newest and most important problems of our time? In the days when a group of peasants resisted the royal tax collector or the increasing burden of feudal claims; when colonized peoples rose up against colonizers; when a whole mining or industrial town went out on strike against unemployment and destitution; popular forces of opposition had no trouble organizing, even if they had plenty of trouble making themselves heard, or obtaining the right to negotiate, or winning a victory over a much more powerful adversary.

Nowadays, the power of central structures shatters the social bases of resistance like a bulldozer, uprooting everything in its way and throwing the debris to the sides of the path it hollows out. Marcuse is wrong in thinking that protest can emerge only on the fringes of the social order, but his reaction is profoundly in accord with a society which tends to marginalize conflict and to confuse it with deviance, which seeks at the outset to locate the roots of protest in deviance. It was not long ago that the forces of opposition presented themselves as defenders of the majority against the ruling minority. Today, in both the East and the West, the authorities base their power on the support of the silent majority, which consists of all those "good" citizens who support segregation, regret imperialist wars when those wars are lost, condemn the excesses of youth, and trust that the authorities will maintain the threatened order. Protest movements seem to address themselves to minorities, even when they speak in the name of groups that are at least as numerous as were the industrial workers when the labor unions took shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Because power touches every aspect of society, its adversaries find it more and more difficult to unite and to generalize their protests.

This problem is not insoluble, but we are still experiencing only the beginnings of a major cultural and social transformation. Consequently, social conflicts cannot be experienced at this point in-

dependently of crises and cultural innovations: the break-up of old cultural patterns and the invention of new ways of communicating, behaving towards nature, speaking, etc.

Some are tempted to interpret this transition only in terms of crisis; others, on the other hand, more concerned with organization, struggle, or negotiation, want to separate social and political action from cultural crisis very quickly. Two opposed errors that, between them, allow no room for balance or a just solution. Crisis and conflict are connected as opposed but inseparable notions during this period of transition, but conflict will not be able to play its central role in society until the cultural crisis is past. And that is what makes the transformation from crisis to criticism urgent. What is needed is criticism of the old forms of culture which are artificially protected by the ruling powers anxious to use every means to disorganize and marginalize social opposition. And the criticism must also address itself to the power structure's constant effort to break down the awareness of conflict into a sense of crisis.

We have entered a period of great doubt. We have passed beyond the certitudes of modernity, abundance, and power that some of us have been opposing for a long time. Empires have lost their legitimacy. The United States no longer has the right to speak in the name of abundance and democracy; the Soviet Union is no longer the bearer of the revolution and the liberation of the working class. The social order is in crisis. But the crisis itself is unexpectedly becoming the instrument of domination. The crisis of nation states, the rise of local, regional, or more generally "ascribed" identities can be turned into an instrument to serve the interests of the multinational corporations. Fear of disorder, deviance, and extremism reinforces the guardians of established order. Dreams of equilibrium, communal life, or return to nature do not worry the massive economic and political systems, and such dreams dissipate the energy of social protest in utopian passions. This destruction of the capacity for action can spread to all of society, inhibiting creativity as well as protest. How then can we get out of this state of crisis? By rediscovering the justification, aim, and importance of social struggle. We have to learn to believe in the future again, a future whose shape will not

flow from the calculations of futurologists, but which will be the fruit of a newly invented culture and new social movements.

The invention of a new image of progress, the extension of democracy, and the recognition of the role to be played by fundamental and never completely negotiable conflicts—these are the three elements which would result in a reconstitution of the political life and consequently an end to the crisis. Maybe we are moving toward such a political renaissance; but we might also fail to reach it. For several years now, the universities have ceased to provide stimulus to political life. The labor movement still possesses vigor, or is in the process of regaining it, in Italy, Spain, France, and Great Britain; but it can no longer play the central role it held for over a century. The great movement of cultural change, of which the women's movement is probably the principal component, sometimes seems to close in on itself in the name of self-expression and the liberation of desires, separating itself further and further from social criticism and political action which are still caught up in the language and forms of the past.

The Western countries seem to be abandoning themselves, as they did almost half a century ago, to the mechanisms and gambles of economic contingency, and to accepting, often with a sense of cowardly feeling, the feeling that they are not responsible for their problems or for the solutions to them. We are not yet rid of the illusions of the affluent society. Most of us still hope that "things will work out," that governments and experts will manage somehow or other in getting out of a crisis whose material consequences have been considerably lessened by negotiated provisions assuring the unemployed of a significant portion of their income—which also serves as a guarantee against a precipitous drop in consumption. Still, we must once again apprehend the necessity of creating new forces of production, both material and cultural. In addition, we must recognize the new class struggles; and finally, we must reject the very idea of crisis insofar as it serves to sustain the dangerous fiction of a social order, a unity of values, norms, and social organization (whether healthy or unhealthy)—a fiction which masks the reality of historical creation and the conflicts implied by and connected with it.

Is it only a play on words to say that our crisis consists in applying the term “crisis” to that which is a social transformation and a transition from old social struggles to new ones? Optimists and pessimists alike have accepted the great myth of the consumer society, the notion that the management of things has replaced the government of men, as the French followers of Saint-Simon contended at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whether society is regarded as the implementation of values, or defined as the embodiment of the ideology of the ruling class, once this remote and hidden principle of unity has been invoked, society is reduced to a universe of objects, of rules and institutions, of signs and instruments of inequality and domination. History seems to have withdrawn from these crystal-like societies. Calculation seems to have replaced action and strategy to have eliminated politics. Society has become desocialized; we no longer have at our disposal instruments for analyzing it as society: only as order, language or technique. To move out of the crisis is to learn to feel responsible again, to rediscover the stakes of collective action. We must take this crystallized society in our hands and shatter it against the wall of our silence and our anger.

Adapted from a translation from the French by Leonard Mayhew.

Robin Magowan

NANCY LING: The California Dream

It's one thing to squat on some lonely stone praying ourselves into the future void, but can't we just find that She, pop that pill, have it all now and forever? All over the American sky are these signs, "Fly now, pay later." Little wonder, then, if one or two of us impatient types indulge, grab that heavy muse with the weird SLA bumper sticker, feeling this time at least we've got it solved. While we lie drinking it all in and the typewriter purrs back and forth, back and forth, no hand but Hers apparently guiding it over the marathon miles, visions come of what freedom itself might mean: an end to this obsessive typing; a new brotherhood; even political life, a name turned to running a foundation if not the country. "Better me than someone else," we'd say and sit there, hugging the piles of papers and beaming into the photographic beyond. But that pretty chick with the shoulder-length hair on your local front page is not called Death-in-Life for nothing; nor is the Orphic Descent any substitute for the Mystic Fire. Try, however, to talk about that and the damndest hell breaks loose—kidnappers, parents, grand juries, FBI—I had seen that Lady naked in her Closet and, between them, they were going to make me pay.

But in those days I was ambitious, and hardly a week passed that didn't find me like Don Quixote getting out my VW to quest for this Keatsian Lady of the Lake, all blue notes in a raven field. Meanwhile my circumstances had reached a point that found me at 35, both fired for a second time by the Berkeley English department—a local record—and divorced by my second wife. Instead of getting out, I remained—caught up in the niceties of Bay Area life and the biweekly visits with my children. I wanted to write and my Boynton

street house seemed as good a place as any other.

But nature with her usual abhorrence of vacuums slipped into my life K., a thin, pink-skinned, chaff-haired first year high school teacher from Pasadena. While this repaired brightly enough some of the sexual havoc, another side of me was being suppressed. This was the writer, and it counted because it was the only thing I knew that constantly made me happy. K. tried to demolish this. She felt she had a mission in life to erase this myth of a self I clung to; this pen that accompanied me everywhere—more a part of my attire than my hip-pocket wallet. Every evening over the dinner table K. would launch this interview, “Why do you write?” “Do you see God?” As she snatched I would rise to the bait and grab back, and even stand there holding this damn pen like a priest’s miter over my head as I declared all that I needed to keep it for. I must have looked rather silly standing there like a 1973 St. George, having no idea who the dragon was, or how on earth I was to dispatch it with just this single shabby instrument.

In the midst of all this excitement a recommendation request from Nancy Ling Perry dawned. She had been an A student in a senior criticism seminar, and now and again, hair teased out like some wonderful prostitute, had turned up as a class auditor. The note, ballpoint over pink, red-lined, school paper read:

*not having accomplished the Tibetan Ritual of Suicide here I
am/I'll see you again*

Robin Magowan—

*time is gone—but if you can dig it—scrawl something on
here. Why aren't you teaching anymore?? I'm writing and
working but i'm going to become a doctor. my name is Nancy
Ling Perry. you have taught me all the best things about
reading & writing . . . many many years ago.*

The name is that of the principal spokesman for the Symbionese Liberation Army, the interracial Berkeley group that abducted Patricia Hearst. But for me at that moment it stood for a bright, sexy girl who had been married to a black composer. Wanting a way out of my claustrophobic home situation I got out my pen and dashed off a letter saying that I had just sent in the recommendation,

but could we meet anyway for lunch? I may also have added that I had an old address of hers, and had tried to invite her to a party a month or so earlier. The letter occasioned a reply, or rather two replies:

*hello robin—dear robin magowan,
perhaps i knew that i was invited to your party (i enclose something i wrote about a dream i had slightly more than 2 few months ago). i had been living for a year in San Francisco until recently. Oh did the ghetto make me ache—at night you lay down and all around you can feel it turn on its side and sometimes sigh. so altho my husband left me a year & a half ago i went the day after halloween and stored all of my so many possessions and made an assignation with exile at my mother-in-law's in East Oakland—the exile necessary for the goal of saving \$\$, which i have—a little—and am looking for a pad in which to be while i pursue this impossible goal which the i ching says is possible.*

Next week I am on a holiday, and it would be truly wonderful to see you. I will call you on wednesday and if you're not there again after that.

You are wise & glad to go laughingly to Zambia & Madagascar. What have you been writing? my lungs are filled with some of it from the fresh sea air at the ocean.

*shanti shanti shanti
ling
ling perry*

Along with this letter, which contained in its upper left-hand corner a round window with some smartweed glued in on transparent paper, came a note addressed “to you”:

I spent the nite & day with you in my dreams yesterday. You appeared wearing a black & brown chinese robe. We walked thru a garden, down a path to a tea room & drank & smoked & talked together. I cannot remember anything you said. But i can see you still as you looked & moved then, until finally we held each other & kissed. It was a vast soft moist satisfying kiss . . .

The note went on in the manner of a palmist to allegorize the dream (freedom, love, happiness, water, bliss) before sexily concluding:

*I wish that i could give you love in our waking hours. I would
kiss your feet, for i have always been intrigued by your
demeanor.*

The stage was set in some preexisting never-never land. All I had to do was walk in, take off my shoes, and be made happy. The Orient would take care of K. and the rest.

She appeared for lunch dressed in a bit of white curtain material that she had ripped off a yardgoods store and cleverly fashioned into a prettily tucked breast-conscious suit. She was, I gathered, at a crossroads. Brought up in Santa Rosa in a lower-middle-class Italian-Irish family—a Chinese girl across the street, her best friend in high school, was also called Ling—she had gone to Whittier, then Berkeley, where as an undergraduate she had gotten married. But her husband must have decided that she had married the ghetto and not him, and that therefore it was perfectly all right to split. At the moment that I had met her this had turned into its own bitter dead end and she was looking to the East as a means of re-attaching herself both to nature and her own sexual identity. She had found a guru who ran a Berkeley vegetarian restaurant and he had convinced her to put her healing hands to public use. Hence the request for a recommendation so that she could get a job at the U.C. Medical School Laboratory. She hoped from there to go on to medical school in the new short-term program for ghetto doctors. Meanwhile, while awaiting the job opening, she meant to take her cats and go live in the country, be her own druidic priestess.

I took her home to fulfill the dream's prophecy and afterwards, by way of celebration, we rolled the *I Ching*, getting Ting, the Cauldron, which aptly suited her basket-shaped body. Not long thereafter, from a Russian River P.O. came a second diary-letter:

1/23 Sunday

*he said that he thought of me as a magician/ did he say
that? he said that we two should write something together—
but was that probably bullshit*

*oh no i am not a magician, not yet—because you do not
really believe that i am.*

*he said to call him sometime when I get a pad
the I Ching under "Ting, the Cauldron" says, "at the*

*bottom are the legs, over them the belly, then come the ears
(handles), and at the top the caning rings."*

*so perhaps i may not call until i get a cauldron. then will i
not be the ceremonial vessel into which you may dip?*

One truth is the nature of contrasts.

One truth is she misses her husband; he loves his wife.

She is the eye abstracted to paper. He is the ear listening.

1/27

*seen by the owl pheasant fresh rain water, your winter
present.*

1/31

*not nails, but talons on my fingertips. i am descended from
the owl.*

*i have been listening again—after more than a year—to
the valiha. et puis je suis allé au Voyage Noir. merci
ling*

1/28

dear R—hello

*dear R—what a lovely lunch we had—you tasted so
exquisite to me*

*2/2 hello, i have fallen into a pad on an acre and a half of
slightly inclining hill just above the Russian River. So i have
decided to take a holiday trip to the forest by the river and not
return to Berkeley until June or September . . .*

*i do not know what i may say—so all i want to say is that i
have missed you a thousand thousand times
shanti shanti shanti*

Were the portents obvious? Could I have foreseen what was to be blown to bits in a soapbox alley? Worse, did I even in some way contribute to it? Although I was not Patricia Hearst I came, I think, close to sharing her fate. My family connections with Wall Street and Supermarketville had me set up for that. For what it's worth one can imagine what the \$2 million food giveaway might have come to with a few more dollars in the till and the world's largest grocery chain doling it out instead of a bunch of hoodlums and philanthropists.

All this may be what comes of reading too many newspapers at too great a distance. And I'm not certain what, if taken, I would

have done. More important is that Miss Hearst and I both passed through Ling's hands and came out different people—politically and morally. The record of my conversion, if that's the word for it, lies in the documents (printed elsewhere) describing what I experienced under the impact of two seething doses of Mescaline; Miss Hearst's is on various tapes, widely enough distributed. Purists might argue that hers has more to do with someone called William Wolfe. To this all I can say is that Wolfe and Ling went down together, while the two of us still live.

Like all affairs this had its geography—in this case forest and desert. The desert was that of Death Valley (natch!) where we spent a week in early May; the forest that of the coastal redwoods north of San Francisco. There we would lie, in a dreamflower space sustained by curtains, sticks of incense, Chinese cooking apparatus, orange-brown stationery, Leroi Jones and *The Serpent and the Rope* and the *I Ching*'s twenty-seven yarrow sticks, a space that might seem anybody's were it not the backroom of a trailer parked in a scabby oak forest on a hillside somewhere off the Russian River. And the strolls to such outlying places as Armstrong Grove that accompanied and, as it were, haloed the sex, suited these meditations on somberness. Any walk could become the night surreptitiously explored, one foot after the other inching forward, wake robin (trillium), shooting star, shy ranunculus. The winter before I had learned these names and was happy to bestow them, while Ling pointed out the hillside of waterfalling dragon's teeth, recalled from a childhood book on Samoa. Being out there blew back images that were of a size with her tiny feet, her black-jeaned dwarf's body stooped to shatter the silence with her hand, make me see the two sides of the forest blade—shadow, soft. This affair with the forest was a resumption of a hushed, mouth-open wonder I had known as a child looking for birds. Each bird was a rainbow of beautiful glass, where the glass meant simply that feather-quick, soft-edged wonder lighting about a tree.

But wasn't this what writing itself was—automatic writing as I came later to practice it. All I had to do was locate a similar forest in my mind, and then, pen in hand, plunge in, staggering and whirling around and naming as many of the local phenomena as possible as I took my notes and shot my way to freedom, leaving a trail of blazing

images and stupefied readers in the dust muttering, “Who was that masked man?” The problem with it was the lack of clarity; one can’t see the future for all the hanging rubbish. But oh what beautiful things there were on those trees as I held my breath and Ling pointed and I stared and finally some burst of phrase darted out from its hiding place, became a thickening opening in my marijuana-furred smile, of what I could learn to do with words. It was as if she held my arm and I, her pupil, sang. And it is this sense of her own growing verbal charisma that her letter, written just after the Armstrong Grove visit, reflects:

wednesday 8

the moon is opening an orange—slices—all of an open orange’s shapes for you. i give you a bowl of it to keep away a cold.

i had a slight mental breakdown, meaning that it broke down for me into a cold—all outrageous because of the germs i gave you. so i chant for you.

dear trillium,

you should burden me with all your complications—i like the thought of curves on my body put there as you burden me with complications.

oh robin,

Do you believe i have powers of healing? These things take time as the cosmic forces within the body stir to movement. I will greet you then, on the 13th, if you’re still going up the coast. Mendocino would be grand—you could see benny bufano’s statue smiling and waving to the sea. Naturally i’ll be here, yet it seems like so much—maybe too much—driving for you. I could come to Berkeley, or meet you somewhere, or something. I think I should try to call you on Sunday—just a really quick ass call—to ask where, when, and hear if you still wish. i’ll ring in the morning, and if no answer then again at night.

The cats have their own scene now. We live with each other outside instead of in—something i’ve been promising them for over a year.

I have spent some little time looking at the mushrooms through the Chinese painting we were in, wondering about either writing something about them (write my diary in the

language of mushrooms) or eating them. how could this latter be any more dangerous than any other thing one might do. i am trying, beginning to see with the third eye. it is dark and probably cold outside. the tree is green iridescence through the window. the nite rings with many bells, rattles sometimes like a tamborine, is still, cool as the sea.

"Meanwhile your writing has gone down to a point." What goes down, comes up, everything is possible. see how the sun rises over the earth. you are so very good at writing shadows, and then writing them "mown, moan" away. it's wonderfully fertile.

*As your muse I shall sometimes be foam on your beard.
and i love you so i chant for you and i love you*

*(sometimes i am distressed with my being here alone, sometimes distressed with other things)
(there is a gentle mist from the clouds that brightens on the leaves and makes me calm and possessed)*

Social portraits elude me; nonetheless I must try. As the later letters show, Ling was suicidal. But what woman worth knowing isn't? This was exacerbated by drugs, her equivalent of a woman's mascara or high-heeled shoes. She needed these props to get herself off, and to bind men to her, make them forget whatever else they may have previously seen. Moreover, it was this drug language that spoke in her. At that time who she was sexually was still up in the air, and her husband's running out on her and a succession of one-night stands hadn't eased the problem. This may have been why I was summoned, as I had ideas about exactly this sort of thing; cheap, easy ideas, I might add, earned at an all too blithe distance. But my life was committed to intimacy, to a driving down, so far as it is possible, into those magic nets which I saw as the basis of all poetry. And this went back a long way to those Long Island summers when I took a mat out into the long waves and went bird watching. Ling's living with me was, I think, a last-ditch effort to prove to herself that she could be that expert seamstress, cook, foot-kisser, and bottle-washer rather than this moll up beside you in your front seat as you roared along, knocked down a few trees, tossed up a frame house, then, the dream half-complete, got bored and drifted off—that whole mindless history that is any Western town.

Ling was no Hollywood high school girl, propped on a drugstore stool, waiting to be Lana Turner. Yet like every Californian she dreamed of being able to lie there, head back, and make you dance out of your pants even though you both had just made love previously. For me this couldn't be. I had recently been to Africa and seen the bodies that would make a Matisse tremble, all shimmering length and softness and colored eyes. Not that Ling wasn't reasonably good looking; otherwise her high school graduation picture wouldn't have been so constantly on the front page, nor would all those campus clubs have formed. But the Italian in her had created breasts that at twenty-five were beginning to sag. Her face was a sallow pitted moon domed with black glorious hair set over a fine nose and a mouth that wavered between orangutang and Polynesian sunset. Meeting her, hair frizzled, all wonderfully, variously shawled and coated, you'd think it was the goddess, Mad Marijuana herself. But the illusion moved with the drug fire until it was only this I saw: the deep gutter of her smile with its way of saying, "Feasts," and pointing way inside her skin, its caverns and ellipses; her husky croak-shadow voice, path to her eyes' cold granite; her eskimo teeth bringing these corkscrews with which I opened the bottles of the dead and stuffed in my microscopic ferns and lice; the curved hatchet strokes of her hands, soft as blown thistles, giving onto "owl-taloned" fingers. Beauty maybe, but of an ambiguous variety.

We naturally indulged. There would be the pies of heaping grass and thus buoyed, we would lie down, hands seeking her breasts, the round moans they gave off as I reached and, walls away, her voice answered: a lost shoe in a well, a hand nestling an egg to its silence. The images come darkling, but I can't see them, knee deep as I am taking out the jelly and putting a giant cantankerous fish in there, and if she likes aquariums, that's good, because otherwise I might have to withdraw and become a worm, see, overcome by the self-pity that comes when sex gets distracted from love, or true desire. Nor does it seem odd that I might feel scared before this way she had of unclouding her bush so that the **WHOLE THING IGNITED**; whereupon Ling would laugh and say, "That's what the Indians do with their chapparal," and I'd be real scared before this sudden flushing in her eyes, pink, sea-pink, like a freighter going to sunset Japan, or like the roses at the bottom of the African mud. . . .

Ling conceived of sex as being blasted—often, hard, that whole “i” of the letters. She wanted to be dissolved into Other, Woman, Goddess. Not a teacher, or a doctor, but a fulcrum of attention, of merciless driving: banging, drumming, beating; because beating is where the heart is at; because beating puts you in a circle with fire—that of her upraised, shoulder-held legs with the vaginal cavity shortened so that the bull’s eyes come across as moans scored, hearts opened up, a hand pushed in or above to help the slow-in-coming; and the man through it all as salmon, wanting his upstream death; she with the little button at the back of the vagina taking the leaping hits until the “Yeah, that’s so, so good, man,” could begin adding their encouragement. But this constant ramming was exhausting—trying to make happen what you had to smack—even if it was African and percussion and woodpecker and lots of other things beside.

On the same score I wonder what her identification with the ghetto and blacks had to do with some early high school projection of her supposed unprettiness? However, if one wants beauty badly enough, sooner or later one is going to attain it. A verse effort attached to one of the later letters reads:

Into the mouth of the blue diamond
glides the beautiful multi-colored fly.
The ball leaps from the socket into the eye.
The asshole of divinity yields
to the still but hungry waters.

Ink drop as candle sings
beauty’s erroneous counterpoints
and contrasts fly
each to make golden
the nervous ocean’s gait.
Oh, that one day I may witness
the sun refuse to drown.

Aren’t “ink drop,” “asshole of divinity,” “beautiful multi-colored fly,” aspects of the same person, wanting nothing less than to be Sucked Up, made one with Cloud and Sperm and Sky? Nor was it long before the desired transformation happened and I found myself savoring the detached islands of her breasts, or lolling in that stream which goes from black hair to mouth to cunt where my eyes lunched

in the belly of the dark ("the mice hear the feast," as Ling answered back).

During the next months in behest to friends I took a number of quick trips: Zermatt, Winnipeg, Death Valley, and finally Hungary. It was as if the wheel of Berkeley life was spinning me out, and even when the distant had temporarily receded a certain anxiety remained: too much quickness, too little seen. Of these only Death Valley (where I went with Ling) was connected with something real—camping out for the first time—and thus lived. The rest were star faded, places wrapped around people, lost in the candlelight of a hand holding a glass, fumbling with its silk tie, anxious not to say something too distressing. It was as if I were boiling inside. I had to get it out or I'd shake apart. During these times I'd write long, dense, multi-multi-page poems, then afterwards lie about shaking like a sailboat, tipsy, tipsy, hoping my head wouldn't split apart in my hands. It was very wonderful and it was very scary; I was cat-high in a tree and didn't know how to get down.

Since Ling was lonely and fundless in her trailer, I suggested that she live in my house while I went on a ten day trip to Zermatt. There she kept a little diary, which I found lying on my desk when I returned:

For the last six years you have begun up grey cement steps. . . . Small buds drop off velvet yellow from the trees and carpet the porch. You walk in. The man who lives in the house left on a ski trip six years ago. It is only be a ten year jaunt so I have abandoned my fear of answering the phone. It's nice for him to be on the snow, if for no other reason than the ten year tax relief (I plan to let him know, anyway, just as soon as the government here collapses).

* * *

I was invited to live in his house. I stack his mail and give water to everyone and chant for him. A vaginal infection, inside, developed in the first year of his absence. I cannot imagine that I am infested with v.d.—too many outrageous, blatant symptoms. So, I wish it to be a private, non-contagious women's maladie. The soreness of the symptoms is easily forgotten over eight years of abstinence; but the worry is an unrelenting fervor of fear. Did I give an infection

to the god that lives in this house? (How can that be? Is he all right?). Yeah sure i call it nothing but the blues.

* * *

*How much can one person do against a houseful of spirits?
When I am very special, i belong; now floating by, now thru
your house, the clinging Li lights, fire thru the trees. The
Japanese person crouches a smile, eyes under the sprinkling
can, out over the hill.*

* * *

The answer in other words might have been a more sustained closeness. Even at home I was never sufficiently with her. Everybody in the revolution had his role, Ling announced, and mine was to go on being one of the hundred flowers. Since nothing could have suited me more—or her little stars of approval flecked here and there in a notebook's silence—I was oblivious when she took off to make a few bucks actressing in a nude movie (can one imagine a cast all shiveringly squatting in a cabin, stoned on acid, in a weekend's rigid, rain-driven silence?). Ling was always hitchhiking somewhere, to the Finnish Bath or the jazz club on Davisadero, trying to secure the drugs, the cocaine that would be her means of wrapping me to her; or more actually keeping her hand in against the day when the bottom in me would finally drop out. "When a woman's down and out she can always take to her back," I remember her once in total misery telling me. But I see the various porno gigs, the dope couriership, the stint as a Russian River topless blackjack dealer, as female equivalents of my own lower-class dream of being an itinerant athlete—the body as its own sufficient passport. Not what one would call a secure relationship.

I think now that Ling and I suffered from a similar need for excess, which we confused with imagination. In me it was verbal, and its traces must linger in what I'm attempting to describe. In Ling it took the form of political anarchism. To some extent this was a response to a reality that had us all pinned, choking, in our seats. We were a state minority, and we were to be tortured by a Reagan expressly elected for that purpose. Still there is some question to what

extent the paranoia was legitimate—the reaction of a culture that suddenly found itself illegal—and to what extent it was a way of herding together.

Neither of us had much sympathy for the usual scatter-ass attempts to burn down a wood shingle NROTC building by attacking it in bright afternoon, two hundred marching strong. If you are going to do something, do it, don't pretend to, and Ling herself lived by her capacity for single-hearted action, that rotten pistol in her roaring hand filled with the cyanide pellets. "Man, there ain't no way that cat's going to survive when I get through with him," she must have flashed before Foster's assassination. But I suspect any political murder fundamentally appealed to her. I remember how pleased she was when, "ALIOTO GOT OFFED," a billboard misreading of mine, became "Alligator got offed, read the crowbarn dance committee's sign." The "impossible dream" of an early letter did not mean becoming a doctor—rather the assassination of a parole officer. At our first lunch she told me that if she had no police record—a few hours' in Santa Rita notwithstanding—that one day in the guise of a servant she'd be able to introduce herself in an officer's home and there do him in. She lived with a whole *commedia dell'arte* of criminal cohorts who knew how to do things, make a train run on time or pick a car lock. She didn't realize that such people pay by being turned into ants and made to run around in smaller and smaller circles until some oaf steps on them, or pours out a tub of hot water. If you work and think this way you become an agent for stupidity and death.

The last blast of mescaline was our coup de grace. Ling had only to read my scrawlings to realize she had become the evil wish, the black wind in my skin. Just as one can discover himself abroad, so Ling had come to see that her life in the ghetto was more than a sordid failure. One of the achievements of the sixties was to destroy the myth of inherent racial-sexual boundaries. A person is who he wants to be—provided he is willing to take on that state of mind in its social entirety. Ling was. She had gotten married and tried to live to its full vicious extent a ghetto life, and now living with me she felt cut off from her people, their broken bottles and vivid shoutings.

By then I could see that her sojourn with me stood more in the nature of a vacation. She needed to recuperate, and I had let her do

that. But I couldn't follow her unless I was willing to pick up a gun and there underground join the coterie of her lovers.

A little earlier, back from Death Valley and very much in love, I had written:

So the night was good to me like curtain
 Like tent, rope, and sheep
 Slip them into my underwear
 Let them be this dead last regret
 That I'm here with you and only writing.
 If my writing could make marshmallows disappear
 If my writing were lead frosting and stars
 I'd give some of it to you
 Like a gun to silhouette your greenness
 These stockings that you take off to lay beside me
 In the place that leads back to my original grain
 In the forest next to your heart

Where the jelly wore a mint mask
 And one day the stocking peeped out of the well
 And was this darkness, drinking kindness
 That flowed like a rope all over me
 Numbing me to myself
 Bringing me into this mute flower
 I cannot call my anything
 My day-to-day love, my only well.

Ling was I, I was Ling. This confusion of selves, of pronouns, exists in an affair as long as the "well" opposite remains your destiny. An interchange of selves is in this sense an interchange of futures. Unfortunately most of us remain single entities; we have only one road and must go it alone. Anything else is a luring us out into that black moonlit pond that so many myths describe. Of course there is no reason why, for a moment or two, we can't plunge in, swim about, and drink off our heads—which may be why the notion of a muse has proved so tempting to poets and musicians. But we can't abide without discovering that the goddess is, as a friend put it, "a BAAAD, BAAAD, *BITCH GODDESS* who will come out of the grave to eat you, to destroy you, to make you unhappy, unstable, to close your eyes to dawn and lure you into the blank cave where albino plants whirl in the dead current."

But an infatuated man doesn't see such things. All I knew was

that Ling wasn't Marlene Dietrich. And I had too much of my own havoc to contend with to start lowering a gun at some foggy miasma such as corporate capitalism. But Ling didn't feel that way. She got together a list and stuck my Pa up there alongside William Randolph Hearst. A slighted goddess is always just a bit dangerous.

Life back at Ling's mother-in-law's didn't pan out. The creature features had become a little too particular. And baby sitting and smoking local yellow poppies—the voice on the phone barely able to wheeze—still left her with a long commute to her medical school laboratory. The way out was to move back, and when she came around asking for a two-month's down-payment on an apartment, I coughed up, glad to have her in the vicinity. Then something went wrong, addresses changed, and next thing I knew here I was with a great swaying carton full of household goodies between my knees, rapping on a blind-drawn street level apartment off of Grove street in the posher Berkeley flats. For a good while, silence. But I could see Ling's form moving back of the blinds, and secure in my carton kept it up until finally she came, asked who it was, peered out unbelievably, and then said in a strange, horrified, husky voice, "You must not come here, you must not come." So I dropped off my carton and vamoosed, sure that I had in some way flushed her out.

I had. There next morning, at 8 a.m. rapping on my door, was Special Delivery:

july 28, '72)

trillium—you goddam tender flower

i guess i have no real basis for saying i thought you knew what i am—a whore, a dope addict—i hussle out of habit. . . .

you'll probably really despise me for saying it's a good thing that last nite was the second day of the new moon for surely nothing else could have saved you. dig, baby, i have clap—not to mention that Gilbert is living at that pad. he was out when you came. he wouldn't have killed you, he would have cut off your penis. he controls the mail box & doors & everything else.

i wish i could say with complete assurance, "i'm sorry that when you offered me yourself i took it." i wish there wasn't this anguish.

it's very dangerous for you to come near me—that's the truth—don't, please.

the last point of irony is thank you for the box of things. i open myself to whatever spirits may come from it. also thank you for everything.

*can you dig that my damnation is your blessing?
love*

But of course between friends nothing is ever terminated. There was the metamorphosis by the orange juice stand still to come. And there were the drugs that always shadowed, conditioned, her existence. Something was about to explode, but what, when, where:

dear robin—hello—hi hi hi

friday, February 9

Finally after one year i feel like i have the privilege to write to you. I don't want to keep living in this world without seeing or hearing your poems sometimes . . . i feel like that's too much

after about 7 weeks of the fall quarter i was just finished—spent a couple of hundred on cocaine, went through an acting routine & took an incomplete, and the fellowship at the lab ends in a few weeks. It is not without its myriad associations of particular kind of madness in which many of us at the lab live.

things with Gilbert in our expensive ass flat went from worse to worse. i tried every kind of old routine to make him leave until finally got the guts to leave myself. did on the first of the new moon this january, renting a room with refrigerator, sink & hot plate in oakland by the lake.

i've learned to play chess this year past—for real.

i was a mad invalid—frequently—from november till january.

oh my newest goal is to travel to Brazil, which is why i'm still hanging around—to save money. and my most rare fortune recently has been to purchase a several months supply of hash oil.

i feel very out front & for real now that i've walked out on Gilbert. course i've been trying it one way or another for years. but shit this time at least is very direct—like i didn't say i was going away on business or nothing—i just said i'm leaving.

hey—I went to the women's international tennis matches. but who is the woman you are living with? did i ever meet

her? no.

*Berkeley's good for one time sensual experiences—
that's what my love life consisted of for most of the time i was
with Gilbert. . . .*

*oh, i am actually very very happy to have heard from you &
hope you come to have dinner before you leave Berkeley?
or you should phone me? or make a deal to write sometimes?
or drop by the orange juice stand at college & bancroft any
weekday afternoon?*

shanti

love

*Sometimes do you think it is we virgos who are so so quiet
when goddam i am surprised to hear from you. there's this
philosophy new to me, which keeps coming around & says*

ITS UNSPEAKABLE

(tho i cannot deny that i do hope to see you)

i'm glad you've planned all these travels

Included on silvery flower-leaf paper was a poem:

Far greater the poet's obligation
To Crime
Than merely to rhyme.

And on another page a poem with that same, all too vast ocean
image:

and sometimes i am the ocean
upon which floats
many troubled rocks

The rocks were all of us, and her own diverse selves.

Needless to say, my new companion and I did not turn up for a
meal over the hot plate. Children or no children I was determined
to get out of Berkeley and Nixon-elected America, and I couldn't
see endangering years of efforts. So in early March I went to Kat-
mandu, and then with a group led by a Berkeley doctor plunged off
on a very moving and painful (bad knee) walk over 18,800 ft. Tesi
Lapcha to the Sherpa communities. I would like to have stayed, but
my efforts to eat back in Katmandu only brought me to the borderline
of dysentery. So I came to France as a place where I could most likely

put on weight. There everything budded—at times thirty or forty pages a day. I stayed only six weeks, but when the house again became vacant in early September, I moved back. My thoughts were then much focussed on Ling. That I had now a political program, a way of seeing myself in relation to others, was, I think wholly her doing. I also wanted to write up my mescaline experiences. This involved certain deletions; since Ling couldn't imagine an underground career that could survive that kind of exposure. I had a draft more or less complete when the last letter came, dated October 7:

to robin,

i wish i could come up with whatever could disguise itself as the correct manner and right words to present what i am about to say; it would be a disguise, though right on, and so i really won't even consider trying. there are probably several reasons why i am endeavoring to communicate with you

1. because if nothing else i think you will appreciate this very brief "manuscript" that i enclose.

a. that is because i carry around this rather intellectually vague idea that you'd like to get at some of the white roots of this country besides the ones we all, and perhaps you especially, already know so much about; that means something about "country and western" as well.

b. where the last picture show ended this begins.

2. because certain things i was doing mentally while staying with you last year have brought me here to this; I remember (among so much) that you once said to me something like you hoped i would be able to actualize my militancy both by being a little more verbally clear as well as make some kind of tangible connections.

7/9/73 11 p.m. BEGIN AGAIN? and for the last time so please bear with me:

dear robin, greetings.

Realizing, perhaps more than i can make you believe, the rather dreadful way in which i betrayed you, realizing this because i've been betrayed many, many times myself:

1. i am very intense and serious these days and when i do just take it upon my mind to relax i get higher than any

drug has ever taken me—ANY DRUG— and for that reason i have finally come to the place—as i'd heard and seen so many others do—where i don't touch NOTHING i even kept a lot of acid, oil, and weed around for the 1st month cuz i just couldn't believe it until finally i threw most of it away—along with handmade sterling silver coke spoons—and then gave the rest away—and all i wonder now is why it took me so damn long to get here?? i mean, you dig, i know i had this outrageous intake due to the fact that i thought i needed to blur the miseries of this reality we all live in Now i've found in these last months a way to direct my rage and work at ending these miseries instead of trying to alter them all around and accept them. So there are some of our brothers—white, black, and brown (not too many asians it seems just now) with whom i correspond and visit and send money orders to and work at legal aid with AND THEY ARE ALL IN THE PRISONS OF THIS STATE OF CALIF. FOR ONE TO LIFE And there it looks like they will stay unless i can generate more financial support than the \$400 a month i make at this orange juice stand My morale, however, is together, and my direction clear, and my insanity problems corrected and my religion sure Have you ever read the Koran??? i'm not into religious rituals of any kind anymore and i regret that i've been a pagan for so long, but i read the Koran and pray in what i consider to be a more sincere fashion. And so i enclose a letter manuscript written by one 22 yr old white man because i thought that you might enjoy it at worst or be touched by it at best I offer it to you because i know i owe you something and this is all i can give

and then now HERE'S THE HARD PART (I'm sure you've seen it coming); naturally there must be at least 2 reasons for everything including letters to you. This man whose letters I send is in desperate need of a retainer to get his lawyer on his job and i, as usual, am in desperate need of a little assistance to keep me on mine (i mean hitching up and down the street soliciting blow jobs at \$10 a shot just isn't making it). So how much to ask you for???? Accepting the fact that you may just not be able to bring yourself to give—give—give me anymore money, let's just say anything from \$500 to \$50 would be welcome (not that i expect you to believe me, but i really don't do drugs no more, and i'm really sorry—maybe even more than a

little—that i whipped so many onto you, really . . .) if you need for tax purposes to make the check out to a lawyer specifically, rather than to me which i am now again, Nancy Ling, i can arrange that. I am trying to be as succinct as possible. I hope you will see by my actions that i did promise myself long ago that i would never hit on you no more than once a year (and if that sounds just too cold to endure remember that i could hardly have made a fool out of you, since i made so much of a giant, desperate fool out of myself, and i'd be willing and even desirous of doing anything you ask). Also while i like to harbor the thought that you'll help me and YOURSELF and some of our incarcerated brothers out i really am not too sure you will, but here's to TRYING hoping that you'll get this soon—and really, wishing you well even if i never hear from youyouyou

love

ling

Doubtlessly I should have seen the desperation behind the letter and coughed up the amount required. But the threat of the yearly blackmail bothered me, and like anybody living abroad without a job I had only so much money, so many days to stretch it into. So I responded with a check for \$50, adding however that I would buy the second overdose's eight pastels for \$450, if she could find them and send them to me. It was a way of making her see that there could be options besides the massage parlor. But the check never got cashed, and to this day is probably lying in some FBI vault, part of a gaunt hypothesis that saw me using Ling for my own political ends. Much of the rest is tabloid history. Shortly, Marcus Foster, the black superintendent of the Oakland school system, would be gunned down, and events soon found Ling paranoically playing with matches in the dry El Cerrito hills. In an area where burning is prohibited this attracted attention, and Ling barely made it out, zooming in her stolen wagon past the incoming sirens.

The documentation survived the attempted cabin fire: address books, a list of people to be kidnapped—my father along with Hearst—and who knows what else. But with all that evidence in police hands the timetable was bound to get speeded up. I had to be found at all costs, and found quickly. I don't know whether

this was part of the original planning, or a result of an article on my poems by Robert Wilson, which had just appeared in the weekly art section of the *Daily Californian*. This resulted in calls both to Wilson and the English department in an attempt to locate me (the caller was the SLA's Angela Lonsford under her pseudonym). But Ling too was busy. Norman Mallory, whom we had stopped off with on the way back from Death Valley, received a note enclosing a return postcard, which would bring him the usual over-antennaed green hornet FBI car, drawn guns, and such prurient questions as "Were they cozy?" followed by months of phone clicking.

*i am sorry i can't tell you who i am or what i'm doing. if you
can get this to robin or know where i can get in touch with
him just mail this postcard so i'll know. it's very important.
i love you and remember our days together warmly and
am sorry i have to stay so mysterious.
love
your sister*

Then came the Hearst kidnapping. From the actressing of the break-in, the white voice on the apartment intercom, I realized that it was Ling; that in the new revolution what was evidently required was a B.A. in Dramatic Art. Some of the rest, too, I liked. Whatever the foul-ups in the food distribution system devised by the Hearsts, it at least proved that there were a great many desperately poor people willing to hazard eight hours, on line and much shame for a ten dollar frozen food hand-out. But the blistering savagery of the shootout was a good deal more than I had reckoned on. Instead, I had expected her to be caught and put in jail, there to blossom forth in the feminist forefront for which her prison social work had amply prepared her. But the police didn't want a trial—spread the contagion?—and instead took the cowardly solution of surrounding Ling and her friends and before a horrified TV audience shooting 165,000 rounds into their Watts cellar. Charred corpses don't speak.

STORIES

Joy Williams

THE EXCURSION

Jenny lies a little. She is just a little girl, a child with fears. She fears that birds will fly out of the toilet bowl. Starlings with slick black wings. She fears trees and fishes and the bones in meat. She lies a little but it is not considered serious. Sometimes it seems she forgets where she is. She is lost in a place that is not her childhood. Sometimes she will say to someone, Mrs. Coogan at the Capt'n Davy Nursery School, for example, that her mother is dead, her father is dead, even her dog Tonto is dead. She will say that she has no toys, that she lives with machinery she cannot run, that she lives in a house with no windows, no view of the street, that she lives with strangers. She has to understand everything herself.

Poor Mrs. Coogan! She pats Jenny's shoulder. Jenny wears pretty and expensive dresses with blue sneakers. The effect is charming. She has blond hair falling over a rather low brow and an interesting, mobile face. She does everything too fast. She rushes to bathtimes and mealtimes and even to sleep. She sleeps rapidly with deep, heart-breaking sighs. Such hurry is unnecessary. It is as though she rushes forward to meet even her memories.

Jenny does not know how to play games very well. When the others play, she is still. She stands with her stomach thrust out, watching the others with a cool, inward gaze. Sometimes, something interrupts her, some urgent voice, perhaps, or shout, and she makes a startled, curious skip. Her brown eyes brim with confusion. She turns pale or very red. Yes, sometimes Jenny has bad days. The crayons are dead, the swings are dead, even little Johnny Lewis who sits so patiently on his mat at snacktime will be dead. He is thirsty and when

he gets the cup of juice which Mrs. Coogan gives him, Jenny is glad for his sake.

"I am so happy Johnny Lewis got his juice!" Jenny cries.

Poor Mrs. Coogan. The child is such a puzzle.

"I don't care for the swimming," Jenny tells her, even though Mrs. Coogan doesn't take her little group swimming. She takes them for a walk. Down to the corner, where the school bus carrying the older children goes by.

"Perhaps you'll like it when you get a little older, when you get a little better at it," Mrs. Coogan says.

Jenny shakes her head. She thinks of all the nakedness, milling and bobbing and bumping against her in the flat, warm, dark water. She says this aloud.

"Oh my dear," Mrs. Coogan says.

"I don't understand about the swimming," Jenny says.

Jenny's father picks her up at four. In the car, he always has a present for her. Today it is a watch. It is only a toy watch, but it has moving parts and the manufacturer states that if it is not abused it will keep fairly reasonable time.

Mrs. Coogan says to Jenny's father, "All children fib a little. It's their nature. Their lives are incompatible with the limits imposed upon their experience."

Jenny feels no real insecurity while Mrs. Coogan speaks, but she is a little anxious. She is with a man. She doesn't smell very good. Outside other men are striking the locked door with sticks.

"Leña," they call. "Leña."

Jenny's father frowns at Mrs. Coogan. He does not wish to be aware that Jenny lies. To him, it is a terrible risk of oneself to lie. It risks control, peace, self-knowledge, even, perhaps, the proper acceptance of love. He is a thoughtful, reasonable man. He loves his only child. He wills her safe passage through the world. He does not wish to acknowledge that lying gives a beat and structure to Jenny's life that the truth has not yet justified. Jenny's imagination depresses him. He senses an ultimatum in it.

Jenny runs to the car. Her father is not with her. He is behind her. Suddenly the child realizes this and whips around to catch him with her eyes. Once again, she succeeds.

Jenny's mother is in the front seat, checking over her grocery list.

She kisses Jenny and shows her the big, colorful watch. A tiny girl sits on a swing within the watch's face. When Jenny winds it, the girl starts swinging, the clock starts to run.

Jenny sits in the back. The car moves out into the street. She hears a mother somewhere crying. Some mother, calling.

"Oh come back and let me rock you on your little swing!"

Jenny says nothing. She is propelled by sidereal energies. They buckle and surge in her acquiescent, gnostic self. Loving, for her, will not be a free choosing of her destiny. It will be the discovery of the most fateful part of herself. She is with a man. When he kisses her, he covers her throat with his hand. He rubs his fingers lightly down the tendons of her neck. He holds her neck in his big hand as he kisses her over and over again.

"Raisin-Bran or Cheerios?" Jenny's mother asks. "Cheddar or Swiss?"

Jenny is just a little girl. She worries that there will not be enough jam, not enough cookies. When she walks with her mother through the supermarket, she nervously pats her mother's arm.

Now, at home, Jenny reads. She is precocious in this. When she first discovered that she could read, she did not tell anyone about it. The words took on the depths of patient, dangerous animals, and Jenny cautiously lived alone with them for awhile. Now, however, everyone realizes that she can read, and they are very proud of her. Jenny reads in the newspaper that that day in San Luis Obispo, California, a seventeen-year-old girl came out of a clothing store, looked around horrified, screamed, and died. The newspaper said that several years previous to this, the girl's sister had woken early, given a piercing scream, and died. The newspaper said that the parents now fear for the welfare of their other two daughters.

Women suffer from the loss of a secret once known. Jenny will realize this someday. Now, however, she merely thinks, "What is the dread that women have?"

Jenny gets up and goes to her room. A stuffed bear is propped on her bureau. She takes it to the kitchen and gives it some orange juice. Then she takes it to the bathroom and puts it on the toilet seat for a moment. Then she puts it to bed.

Jenny wakes crying in the night and rushes into her parents' room. She is not sure of the time; she is not sure if they will be there.

Of course they are there. Jenny is just a child. On a bedside table are her mother's reading glasses and a little vase of marigolds. Deeply hued, yellow, red, and orange. Her parents are very patient. She is a normal little girl with fears, with nightmares. The nightmares do no real harm, that is, they will not alter her life. She is afraid that she is growing, that she will grow too much. She returns to her room after being comforted, holding one of the little flowers.

The man likes flowers, although he dislikes Jenny's childishness. He removes Jenny's skimpy cotton dress. He puts the flowers between her breasts, between her legs. The house is full of flowers. It is Mexico on the Day of the Dead. Millions of marigolds have been woven into carpets and placed on the graves. Jenny's mouth hurts, her stomach hurts. Yes, the man dislikes her childishness. He kneels beside her, his hands on her hips, and forces her to look at his blank, warm face. It is a youthful face, although he is certainly no longer a young man. Jenny had seen him when he was younger, drunk, blue-eyed. It doesn't matter. He doesn't age. He has had other loves and he has behaved similarly with them all. How could it be otherwise? Even so, Jenny knows that she has originated with him, that anything before him was nostalgia for this. Even so, there are letters, variously addressed, interchangeably addressed, it would seem. These letters won't be kept. It isn't the time, but they are here now, in a jumble, littered with the toys. Jenny reads them as though in a dream. This is Jenny! As in a dream too, she is less reasonable but capable of better judgement.

I won't stay here. The alleys have disgusting names— the Street of the Little Head, for example. It is a tomb, this town, and the streets are full of whores, women with live mice or snakes or fish in the clear plastic heels of their shoes. Death and the whores are everywhere, walking in these bright, horrible shoes.

How unhappy Jenny's mother would be if she were to see this letter! She comes into the child's room in the morning and helps her tie her shoes.

"You do it like this," she says, crossing the laces, "and then you do this, you make a bunny ear here, see."

Her mother holds her on her lap while she teaches her to tie her shoes. Jenny is so impatient. She wants to cry as she sees her mother's

eager fingers. Jenny's nightie is damp and sweaty. Her mother takes it off and goes to the sink where she washes it with sweet-smelling soap. Then she makes Jenny's breakfast. Jenny is not hungry. She takes the food outside and scatters it on the ground. The grass covers it up. Jenny goes back to her room. Everything is neatly put away. Her mother has made the bed. Jenny takes everything out again, her toy stove and typewriter and phone, her puppets and cars, the costly and minute dollhouse furnishings. Everything is there: a tiny papier-maché pot roast dinner, lamps, rugs, andirons, fans, everything. The cupboards are full of play bread, the pool is full of play water. A book is open to its play pages.

On the wedding day, James's companion cautioned him to have a large vessel full of water ready when he went to bed that night. "And when the bride gets up, toss her into it," the companion said. "Then she will turn into a raven. Put the raven back in the water, and she will become a dove. Plunge the dove under water, and she will come out in her true form, as gentle as an angel and a true and perfect wife."

Jenny's face is tense and intimate. She knows everything, but how aimless and arbitrary her knowledge is! For she has only desire; she has always had only the desire for this, her sleek, quiescent lover. He is so cold and so satisfying for there is no discovery in him. She goes to the bed and curls up beside him. He is dark and she is light. There are no shadings in Jenny's world. He is a tall, dark tree rooted in the stubborn night, and she is a flame seeking him—unstable, transparent. They are in Oaxaca. If they opened the shutters they would see the stone town. The town is made of a soft, pale green stone that makes it look as though it has been rained upon for centuries. Shadows in the shape of men fall from the buildings. Everything is cool, almost rotten. In the markets, the fruit beads with water; the fragile feathered skulls of the birds are moist to the touch.

The man sleeks her hair back behind her ears. She is not so pretty now. Her face is uneven, her eyes are closed.

"You're asleep," he says. "You're making love to me in your sleep. *Vete a la chingada*." He says it slangily and softly, scornfully as any Mexican. She is nothing, nowhere. There is something exquisite in this, in the way, now, that he holds her throat. The pressure is so

familiar. She yearns for this. She whimpers with her love for this, cries with hope for its erotic end.

But he turns from her. He leaves.

Jenny pretends sleep. She plays that she is sleeping. She is fascinated with her sleep where everything takes place as though it were not so. Nothing is concealed. On stationery from the *Hotel Principal* there is written:

Nobody to blame. Call 228

She sits at a small desk, drinking beer and reading. She is reading about the Aztecs. She notes the goddess, TLAZOLTEOTL, the goddess of filth and fecundity, of human moods, sexual love, and confession. Jenny sits very straight in the chair. Her neck is long, full, graceful. But she feels out of breath. The high, clear air here makes her pant. The man pants too while he climbs the steep, stone steps of the town. He smokes too much. At night, when they return from drinking, he coughs flecks of blood onto the bathroom mirror. The blood is on the tiles, in the basin. Jenny closes her own mouth tightly as she hears him gag. Breath is outside her, expelled, not doing her any good. She stands beside the man as he coughs. There is not much blood, but it seems to be everywhere, late at night, after they have been drinking, everywhere except on the man's clothes. He is impeccable about his clothes. He always wears a grey lightweight suit and a white shirt. He has two suits and they are both grey, and he has several shirts and they are all white. He is always the same. Even in his nakedness, his force, he is smooth, furred, closed. He is simple to her. There is no other way offered. He offers her the death of his sterility. His sexuality is the source of life, and his curse is death. He offers her nothing except his dying.

She wets her hands and wipes off the mirror. He doesn't mention the blood. When he kisses her, his tongue in her mouth tastes only of whiskey. She cannot imagine him dead really. She is just a child embracing the crisis of a woman. The death she sees is that of herself in his emptiness. And he fills her with it. He floods her with emptiness. She grasps his thick, longish hair. She feels as if she is floating through his hair, falling miraculously away from danger into death. Safe at last.

"Jenny, Jenny, Jenny," her mother calls.

"I want a baby," Jenny says. "Can I have a baby?"

"Of course," her mother says, "when you get to be a big girl and fall in love."

Jenny will write on the stationery of the *Hotel Principal*:

The claims of love and self-preservation are opposed.

The man looks over her shoulder. He is restless, impatient to get going. They are going to the baths outside of town, in the mountains. A waterfall thuds into a long, stone basin which has been artificially heated. It is a private club, crowded with Americans and wealthy Mexicans. When Jenny and the man arrive at the baths, they first go to a tiny stone cubicle where the man strips. He hangs his clothes carefully from the wooden pegs which are fixed in the stone. Jenny looks outside where a red horse grazes from a long, woven tether. There is water trickling over the face of the hillside. There is very little grass. The water sparkles around the horse's hooves. The man turns Jenny from the window and begins to undress her. She is like a little child with artless limbs. He rolls her pants down slowly. He slips her sweater off. He does everything slowly. Her clothes fall to the floor which is wet with something, which smells sweet. With one hand, the man holds her arms firmly behind her back. He doesn't do anything to her. She cannot smell him or even feel his breath. She can see his face which is a little stern but not frightening. It holds no disappointment for her. She tries to move closer to him, but his grip on her arms prevents her. She begins to tremble. Her body feels his stroking, his touch, even though he does nothing. Her body starts to beat, to move in the style of their lovemaking. She becomes confused, the absence of him in her is so strong. She closes her eyes, her knees sag. At last he enters her.

Later, the man goes out to the pool. Jenny hates the baths, but they come here several times a week on the man's insistence. She dresses and goes out to the side of the pool and watches the man swim back and forth. There are many people here, naked or nearly so, tossing miniature footballs back and forth. She sees the man grasp the ankles of a woman and begin to tow her playfully through the water. The woman wears silver earrings. Her carefully touseled hair is silver,

her pubic hair is silver. Her mouth is a thickly frosted white. The water foams on her skin in tiny translucent bubbles. The woman laughs and moves her legs up in a scissors grip around the man's waist. Jenny sees him kiss her.

Another man, a Mexican, comes up to Jenny. He is barechested and wears white trousers and tall, yellow boots. He absently plucks at his left nipple while he looks at her.

"Ford Galaxie," he says at last. He takes a ring of car keys from his pocket and jerks his head toward the mountains.

"No," Jenny says.

"Galaxie," the Mexican says. "Galaxie. *Rojo*."

Jenny sees the car, its red shell cold in the black mountains, drawn through the landscape of rock and mutilated maguey. Drawn through, with her inside, quietly transported.

"No," she says. She hates the baths. The tile in the bottom of the pool is arranged in the shape of a bird, a heron with thin legs and a huge, flat head. Her lover stands still in the water now, looking at her, amused.

"Jenny," her mother laughs. "You're such a dreamer. Would you like to go out for supper? You and Daddy and I can go to the restaurant that you like."

For it is just the summer. That is all it is, and Jenny is only five. In the house which they are renting on Martha's Vineyard, there is a dinghy stored in the rafters of the living room. The landlord is supposed to come for it and take it down, but he does not. Jenny positions herself beneath the dinghy and scatters her shell collection over her legs and chest. She pretends that she has been cast out of it and floated to the bottom of the sea.

"Jenny-cake, get up now," her mother says. The child rises heavily from the floor. The same sorrow undergone for nothing is concluded. Again and again, nothing.

"Oh Jenny-cake," her mother says sadly, for Jenny is so quiet, so pale. They have come to the Island for the sunshine, for play, to offer Jenny her childhood. Her childhood eludes them all. What is the guide which Jenny follows?

"Let's play hairdresser," her mother says. "I'll be the hairdresser and you be the little girl."

Jenny lets her comb and arrange her hair.

"You're so pretty," her mother says.

But she is so melancholy, so careless with herself. She is bruised everywhere. Her mother parts her hair carefully. She brings out a dish of soapy water and brushes and trims Jenny's nails. She is put in order. She is a tidy little girl in a clean dress going out to supper on a summer night.

"Come on Jenny," her mother urges her. "We want to be back home while it's still light." Jenny moves slowly to the door that her father is holding open for them.

"I have an idea," her mother says, "I'll be a parade and you be the little girl following the parade."

Jenny is so far away. She smiles to keep her mother from prattling so. She is what she will be. She has no energy, no talent, not even for love. She lies face down, her face buried in a filthy sheet. The man lies beside her. She can feel his heart beating on her arm. Pounding like something left out of life. A great machine, a desolate engine, taking over for her, moving her. The machine moves her out the door, into the streets of the town.

There is a dance floor in the restaurant. Sometimes Jenny dances with her father. She dances by standing on top of his shoes while he moves around the floor. The restaurant is quite expensive. The menu is written in chalk on a blackboard which is then rolled from table to table. They go to this restaurant mostly because Jenny likes the blackboard. She can pretend that this is school.

There is a candle on each table, and Jenny blows it out at the beginning of each meal. This plunges their table into deep twilight. Sometimes the waitress relights the candle, and Jenny blows it out again. She can pretend that this is her birthday over and over again. Her parents allow her to do this. They allow her to do anything that does not bring distress to others. This usually works out well.

Halfway through their dinner, they become aware of a quarrel at the next table. A man is shouting at the woman who sits beside him. He does not appear angry, but he is saying outrageous things. The woman sits very straight in her chair and cuts into her food. Once, she puts her hand gently on the side of his head. He does not shrug it off nor does it appear that he allows the caress. The woman's hand falls back in her lap as though it had been severed by its contact with him.

"Please don't," the woman says. "We're spoiling the others'

dinner.”

“I don’t care about the others,” the man says. “I care about you.”

The woman’s laugh is high and uneasy. Her face is serene, but her hands tremble. The bones glow beneath her taut skin. There is a sense of blood, decay. The smell of love.

“Nothing matters except you,” the man says again. He reaches over and picks up the food from her plate. It is some sort of creamed fish. He squeezes it in his hand and lets it drop on the table between them. It knocks over the flowers, the wine. “What do you care what others think?” he says.

“I don’t know why people go out if they’re not intending to have a nice time,” Jenny’s mother whispers. Jenny doesn’t speak. The man’s curses tease her ears. The reality of the couple, now gone, cheats her eyes. She gazes fixedly at the abandoned table, at the garbage there. Everywhere there is disorder. Even in her parents’ eyes.

“I would say that woman had a problem there,” Jenny’s mother says.

Outside, the sunset has dispersed the afternoon’s fog. The sun makes long paddle strokes through the clouds. At day’s end, the day creaks back to brightness like a swinging boom. Jenny walks down the street between her parents. At the curb, as children do, she takes a little leap into space, supported, for the moment, by their hands.

And now gone for good, this moment. It is night again.

“It’s been night for a long time,” the man says. He is shaving at the basin. His face, to about an inch below his eyes, is a white mask of lather. His mouth is a dark hole in the mask.

Jenny’s dizzy from drinking. The sheets are white, the walls are white. One section of the room has a raised ceiling. It rises handsomely to nothing but a single light bulb, shaded by strips of wood. The frame around the light is very substantial. It is as though the light were caged. The light is like a wild thing up there, pressed against the ceiling, a furious bright creature with slanty wings.

In the room there is a chair, a table, a bureau, and a bed. There is a milkshake in a glass on a tin tray. On the surface of the milk, green petals of mold reach out from the sides toward the center.

“Clean yourself up and we’ll go out,” the man says.

Jenny moves obediently to the basin. She hangs her head over

the round black drain. She splashes her hands and face with water. The drain seems very complex. Grids, mazes, avenues of descent, lacings, and webs of matter. At the very bottom of the drain she sees a pinpoint of light. She's sure of it. Children lie there in that light, sleeping. She sees them so clearly, their small, sweet mouths open in the light.

"We know too much," Jenny says. "We all know too much almost right away."

"Clean yourself up better than that," the man says.

"You go ahead. I'll meet you there," Jenny says. For she has plans for the future. Jenny has lived in nothing if not the future all her life. Time had moved between herself and the man but only for years. What does time matter to the inevitability of relations? It is inevitability that matters to lives, not love. For had she not always remembered him? Had she not always been aware of his plans for her? And seen him rising from a kiss? Always.

When she is alone, she unties the rope that ties her luggage together. The bag is empty. She has come to this last place with nothing, really. She has been with this man for a long time. There had always been less of her each time she followed him. She wants to do this right, but her fingers fumble with the rope. It is as though her fingers were cold, the rope knotted and soaked with sea water. It is so difficult to arrange. She stops for a moment and then remembers in a panic that she has to go to the bathroom. That was the most important thing to remember. She feels close to tears because she almost forgot.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she cries.

Her mother leads her there.

"This is not a nice bathroom," her mother says. Water runs here only at certain times of the day. It is not running now. There are rags on the floor. The light falling through the window is dirty.

"Help me mother," Jenny says.

Her stomach is so upset. She is afraid she will soil herself. She wants to get out in the air for a moment and clear her head. Her head is full of lies. Outside the toilet, out there, she remembers, is the deck of the motor sailer. The green sails which have faded to a style of blue are luffing, pounding like boards in the wind. She closes the door to the toilet. Out here is the Atlantic, rough and blue and cold.

Of course there is no danger. The engines are on; they are bringing the people back to the dock. The sails have the weight of wood. There is no danger. She is all right. She is just a little girl. She is with her mother and father. They are on vacation. They are cruising around the island with other tourists. Her father has planned an excursion for each day of their vacation. Now they are almost home. No one is behaving recklessly. People sit quietly on the boat or move about measuredly, collecting tackle or coiling lines or helping children into their sweaters.

Jenny sees the man waiting on the dock. The boat's engines whine higher as the boat is backed up, as it bumps softly against the canvas wrapped pilings. The horrid machine whines higher and higher. She steps off into his arms.

He kisses her as he might another. She finds him rough, hurtful at first, but then his handling of her becomes more gentle, more sure in the knowledge that she is willing.

His tongue moves deeply, achingly in her mouth. His loving becomes autonomous now. It becomes, at last, complete.

POEMS

(The poems for this issue were chosen by Philip Levine.)

Gary Soto

SPIRIT

When Grandma cried
Hugging the shirt
Flecked with
Your blood
You stood in the room again
You saw her drop
To her knees
Kiss the rosary
And repeat prayers
Until a white paste
Gathered in the corners
Of her mouth
The next morning
Your cup and plate
Brimmed with cemetery grass
And the sofa
You gave Grandpa
Turned and faced south
We know you came back father
And in the doorway
Leading to your bedroom
Wanted to fog
The family's photo
With the breath
You did not have

And years later
When your wife slept
With another
You waited
At their feet
Until they turned
From one another
Eyes closed
And sighing
Leaving them
A cupboard opened
The garage light
On and burning silent
As your jealousy
But was it you father
Who sent me across
A dry orchard
Where I pointed
To a thin cloud
And thought beyond
That cloud
You lived in Limbo
God's Limbo
And were watching
And soon for
The first time
You would come to me
Calling son son

Rutger Kopland

POEM ABOUT THE RIVER DRENTSE A

What we find beautiful, without cynicism, is
love and after love, the bar. There
we sit with our laughing faces, liking
each other, but we're only allowed to believe
that which is true, we laugh with our teeth, our hands
on the table, waiting for us
to carry them off. Sure, we'll definitely go
to the Drentse A again.

If only we had the courage to
talk about it, after all we saw
what horses do, how absent-mindedly the one
put his head over the other one's neck, how they bit
each other softly, walked as if they'd been
following each other for years without knowing it,
how they stood, up to their knees in the bogs,
bowing to the A.

This wasn't any new feeling today,
a feeling only meant for each other,
it was old and will stay, it didn't
leave when we did. I can't touch your hand,
your hand that says, You don't have to stay.
I'm looking at someone who isn't
here, not in this bar.

Translated from the Dutch by Ria Leigh-Loohuizen

Ray A. Young Bear

A WOMAN'S NAME

the faces who grew up
with me are still here.
i can only ask them
and they'll tell you
i haven't done wrong.
the huts of my bleeding
have all gone.
i've wrapped the cooking
chains in newspaper
ready to be given away.
through all of this,
the trees stand for
a purpose. they remind
me of the time i lived
here, walking around
with my heart, my horse,
singing to anything
but afraid to meet
anyone who might catch
me with my mouth wide
open, the sun inside,
warming the bandaged
body of my child,
lost for good.

Nils Nelson

UNFINISHED

I play the same album you weaned yourself on
when Anna left.

We worry too much, you and I,
the little Thoreau
eating his dessert in quiet.

We keep adding ourselves up.
What we've done almost never matters, our experience
stockpiled like Citizen Kane's collections.
Picture a janitor in his own basement,
his flashlight on the pipe with a weak seam.

Foreign cities on your postcards,
narrow streets, the walls whitewashed with lime.
I follow the flowered carpet of a theater aisle
into daylight, a sidewalk table
where I practice with a stranger.

The record goes on complaining
in the last room of my railroad apartment.
At least I wake in a bed,
palms up, pushing morning onto shelves
I can reach.

This ring
you gave me, carved
from a bleached cow jaw.
I hold the eye of bone up to light,
peering in
like a jeweler checking for flaws.

Someone wrote that nature conspires against originality.
I take up where you left off.
Leaving teaches size.
When you come back I'll be here
bent over the balloon tire,
filling, refilling—it's never right.

Sandra Hoben

BOTTICELLI

My heels, in their mummy bag,
try to dig into the slope. At dawn
the cliffs and valleys below open
like a crumpled piece of paper
thrown in the fire.

I find you by the lake.
In the water, the sun
spirals around your shadow, like the underside
of a chanterelle mushroom.
I dive in
and swim as far as I can.

* * *

A circle of braided rugs, afternoon light
tunneling through the trees.
I walk up to the fire
where you sit, sipping coffee,
and ask:

Did you ever want
someone's firstborn?

Did your lover
wish you cut up
into stars?

Are you fictional?

You admit that you are.

* * *

It's called Botticelli,
we play by the rules. With one initial
I search through all the names
I know. Your answers are indirect—
you tell me what you can—
I go on
turning the first letter of your name
until it blossoms: Will.
I say I will.

* * *

Stubble foothills, snowline
of poison oak and pine. We lie down
and watch the trees turn.
You are the color of eucalyptus—
how do these trees live, bark peeled back,
more naked than anything I've touched?

Escapees, they take over the ground,
nothing grows beneath them.
A butterfly, feeding on the leaves,
becomes poisonous and survives.

* * *

You're lost
in the syllables of my name,
you taste my arm
for a clue: I'm salty, something the sea
ground and left behind. It doesn't give you much
to go on.

Ernesto Trejo

CIPRIANA (1881-1975)

There were trains that went in the tunnels
and never came out. The eyes of horses
focused and trotted to their deaths.
The corn slept in the cistern
and was rotted when it woke.

An old photo. You stand next to your marigolds
(the flower of death, mother tells me)
and I cling to your skirt. How strange to be four,
watching the print on your skirt. Behind us,
the paint peeled off the wall all morning,
your honeysuckle thirsted for light, your ivy
found a crevice and went in.
Four years before you had named me.

You never saw the sea or the pelicans
winged like angels. In the end your visions
were embarrassing: a granddaughter
sleeping with satan; a voice in every corner,
beckoning; your husband, the blind man
lost in prayer, a daddy that would punish.
Today your daughters, aging, won't talk about the end.
I do. I take the space in which you lived,
your life, and put it in my pocket, and name you.

Marjorie Grene

**LIFE, DEATH, AND LANGUAGE:
Some Thoughts on Wittgenstein and Derrida**

However diverse have been the styles of philosophizing of the past half-century, the practitioners have agreed on one thing: we need a new beginning. Even if, like Heidegger, they tell us to try to relive the *first* beginning of Western thought, that very repetition would be a renewal, and so, new. In a number of these adjurations to a fresh start, moreover, reflection on the traditional interpretation of language has had a central place. I want here to compare two such language-focused enterprises, which look—and are—very different, yet feel—and are—somehow related, if only in the glaring diversity of their ways of dealing with one problem. What I'm trying to do, I suppose, is to take Wittgenstein in his *Investigations* period as more familiar to most of my readers (though he's long been, I must confess, very puzzling to me), to consider some characteristics of his method of letting the fly out of the fly bottle, and to compare these with Derrida's techniques of showing that, in fact, the fly can never get in. (It might seem more appropriate if one wants to interpret Derrida by reference to someone in the British tradition, to take Austin rather than Wittgenstein, since he himself has written an essay on Austin, but the parallels with Wittgenstein, I find, are irresistible, and certainly sufficient unto the day. So, except for the briefest allusion, a comparison with other approaches to language will have to await another occasion.)

Well, then, what of Wittgenstein and Derrida on language? They agree on their starting point: the traditional conception of language, both insist, immobilizes thought. Somehow this rigidity, this one-track thinking, must be overcome. But they differ both in their

diagnosis of the pathology and in their prescription for treatment. Neither, I should say at once, expects a quick cure!

First, the diagnosis. Let's start from the Augustinian account with which the *Investigations* opens. Strangely for the author of the *De Magistro*—where it is Christ the teacher who teaches within—this is an almost physicalist description of language-learning. There are things and there are sounds emitted by grown-ups, and the child learns to imitate the sounds and to correlate them in the same way with the things. What we begin with, in other words, is a good *Tractatus*-like mirroring of words and items in the world. But what the child learns, St. Augustine tells us, is ultimately to use the sounds, not *just* in order to refer, but to implement "his own desires." So there is something in him, something "inner" or "mental," that is served by those convenient correlations. The traditional conception of language includes all three: signs, things, and the inner life, the soul, the subject, whatever it is that wants something from speaking, wants to express itself in speech. So Wittgenstein remarks in *Zettel*: Philosophy always seeks either a symbol system or a secret inner process. Philosophy wants language to be either monolithically objective, or subjective—or perhaps, as in Baby Augustine's case, one for the sake of the other: name-giving for the sake of my desires.

The same three ingredients—words, things, and mental life—or signs, substances, and souls if one wants an alliterative and Aristotelian tag—are universal in the traditional view of language. But in Derrida's version they come in a rather different mix. His paradigms in *De La Grammatologie* are Plato, Rousseau, and Saussure, but also Husserl—the last especially in *La Voix et le Phénomène*, a critique of one chapter of the *Logical Investigations*. What have all these—and, for Derrida, the whole tradition—in common? They all share an ideal of what the living voice can accomplish. The sound—the *signifiant*—that is, those sounds that grown-ups make and that the child learns to make too—the sound designates and points to a concept or thought or thinking in the mind. That thought, or thinking, is the *signifié*. But that thought in turn reflects or expresses a reality, an object of thinking which is present to the mind, luminously and evidently, in its thinking and as, so to speak, it speaks. The correlation of *signifiant* and *signifié* is of course conventional, as is the correlation of words and things in the Augustinian story. But what is conventionally

correlated in this account are sounds and “inner” processes, and the relation to reality—to “things”—makes its appearance, or is said to do so, only in that presence of Being to the mind which is expressed, or is said to be expressed, by the speaker in living speech. I shall have more to say later about the relative places of nature and convention in Derrida’s, as compared with Wittgenstein’s, interpretation of language. But for now let us just settle this much: traditional philosophers, Wittgenstein and Derrida agree, insist on the interaction of three ingredients which are signs, thoughts, and reality (or realities) of some kind in their account of language. For Wittgenstein, signs have been too single-mindedly and simple-mindedly correlated with things; and/or the process has been stubbornly misdirected to some “inner” going-on that somehow philosophers have thought it must be *for*. In Derrida’s view, the single/simple-mindedness of the tradition has resided in its belief that the outer (sound) refers univocally to an inner (thought) which in its turn is intuitively united with the Being present to it in that thought. True speech has been conceived as the speech of the lover who has climbed the ladder, of the philosopher who has escaped the cave to live in the light of the sun.

Now given these two very different diagnoses of the same disease, we shall not be surprised to find both the problems raised and the methods used to deal with them very different too. Wittgenstein has a seemingly workable model to start from, but one that turns out to be partly too simple and partly rather silly. On the one hand, philosophy seeks symbol systems—correlations of words and things—but they don’t come out just right (this against himself in the *Tractatus*. And, on the other hand, philosophy seeks to go from this outer, working—or not quite working—word-thing relation to some inner life—the desires of the child Augustine—on which the process somehow hangs. Here Wittgenstein is opposing, not so much his own early view, as almost every one else; for this kind of inner something that philosophers are always chasing never gets caught at all. Given this simple, partly operative but limited model, then, he asks: Why tie ourselves to this one very simple pattern of linguistic activity with its will-o-the-wisp accompaniment? Doesn’t language work in all sorts of other ways? Is language *always* like that? Derrida, in contrast, is looking not at a working machine too simply understood, but at a dream of language, an alleged machine that has never existed and

never worked at all. True, it is a dream we cannot escape. The hope of presence is incurable. But it is incurable precisely because it is a dream, not reality. Being never *is* present as the myth of presence claims it is. And yet the dream also has a reality insofar as dream itself is an aspect of our reality, of the kind of beings we are. Now Wittgenstein, too, admittedly takes account of what is unreal or misguided in the traditional view of language—not only of what is too limited or abstract. The thrust to an “inner” life, the beetle-in-the-box syndrome, represents perhaps half of the ideal of presence. But in his version, the routine working of language in the ordinary world of human interests and activities overmasters the persistent dream. The ghost of inwardness can be shoved into the lumber-room of superstitions where all ghosts belong. For Derrida, in contrast, it’s a very live haunt indeed. He has to ask, not how shall we supplement a one-sided and partly foolish view of language, but how shall we dismantle a deeply mistaken yet inevitable conception? He has to ask head on: Is language *ever* like that? To find what’s happening when we speak, we must take the ghost apart—a tricky job, for ghosts are notoriously hard to catch, let alone to disarticulate.

Where have we got to? Both Derrida and Wittgenstein find philosophical thinking about language perversely inflexible, and both seek to shake up somehow our thinking about it. But since they conceive the traditional triad so differently, the questions they ask of language are correspondingly different. Yet here too there is something shared in their two enterprises. Neither seeks to substitute for a wonted rigidity some new philosophical system that will replace it. On the contrary, they both cultivate techniques for questioning language and for catching it at work; techniques to free it from the illusions of philosophy, not to enslave it afresh. Let me try to characterize very briefly these two techniques and then enumerate somewhat randomly some contrasts between them.

Wittgenstein’s technique—forgive me for saying it once more—is to *reconstruct* language at work. Derrida’s, in contrast, is to *deconstruct* its alleged working. Wittgenstein complexifies the traditional account by setting the real machinery to work in a whole range of ways, over and over, till philosophical simple-mindedness withers away (or seems to) and the silly ghost of inwardness flutters harmlessly off (or so one hopes). His method, though deep and difficult,

goodness knows, is *meant* to make things easy, as too many of his presumed disciples have too readily supposed. He wants to oil the machinery and declare our philosophical holiday over. Derrida, on the other hand, decidedly wants to make things difficult. He too complexifies the traditional account, but so that we feel both its power over us and its impotence to find its own, and our, fulfillment. Wittgenstein adjures us: treat the philosophic illness with constant exercise; make language games work! The ice of logic is slippery: back to the rough ground! Derrida plays *with* language. He takes it apart ("deconstruction" is his own name for his own enterprise), and finds it not working better, more wholesomely, than philosophy dreamed, but much less well. We are ensnared in language, trapped at once by the philosophic vision and its impossibility of fulfillment. Speaking is not playing games in the world, as Wittgenstein wants us to discover; it is the game *of* the world (*le jeu du monde*), it plays with us. As flies are to wanton boys, we could almost say, are we to our words. Yet Derrida's path, too, I think, is meant in a way to be one of liberation. Spinozistically, perhaps, we should learn to see our destiny for what it is and to turn the games words play with us into an inwrought, reflexive, never-ending and ever paradoxical game we play with them. I hope what follows may clarify somewhat these enigmatic pronouncements. For a start, I am contrasting, as I've said, the reconstruction of a reality with the deconstruction of a dream: games in the world with the game of the world.

But I must stop to insert a warning note here. Contrasting Wittgenstein's language games with Derrida's "game" or "play" of the world, I am doubtless contrasting also the divergent resonances of *Spiel* and *jeu*, complicated further, indeed, by *our* thinking of *Sprachspiele* as language-games. How Wittgenstein himself thought of them, as between the German and English "Spiel" and "game" (which are by no means equivalent), who can possibly say? Maybe there's a Derridaan lesson here. If one of the most profoundly influential philosophers in the English-speaking world thought and wrote in a foreign tongue, what can we really know of his thought, or he of ours? Indeed, John Findlay has argued surprisingly but convincingly, I think, that Wittgenstein was at bottom a solipsist, that all those games were licensed to go on in the hearty, public world while *he* struggled with an inner striving that *wouldn't* come out. Be that as it

may, what I am trying to elucidate is the *texts* of Wittgenstein and Derrida (another Derridaan admission, as we shall shortly see), and not their secret souls. Wittgensteinians will cry: but there are no secret souls! Yet Wittgenstein's lesson *could* be: if there are—or if there is one, mine—you'll never know because no one can ever say.

But enough of this ornamentation. Back to my theme: Reconstruction-deconstruction. How to elaborate this contrast? Let's have a look at a series of further contrasts that grow out of, or have bearing on, it. Take first, or next, the contrast of inner and outer. Wittgenstein says: Forget it! (Even if Findlay's right, that's what he *says*.) Forget the rigid reference of the Augustinian model, forget the foolish flickering of the "inner" happening. *When* does the "inner" happening of knowing how to play chess take place? What a silly question! I *play* chess. *When* do I know English? I speak it. The contrast of inner event and outer doing is simply an impediment to understanding what in fact goes on. From this position Derrida is just as different as possible. For him indeed, "différance" is what it's all about. "Différance" with an "a," mind you, to show that the difference between inner and outer—or rather, the whole nest of differences inherent in speech—is not an ordinary difference. It is the *conflict* of meaning with what it's meant to mean (difference is what we fight about), the *gap* between meaning and what it's meant to mean, the spatialization, the spreading out into representation of what should have been a pure presentation of intuitive clarity; and by the same token the deferring (one word in French: *différer*, to differ; *différer*, to defer), the deferring of the moment of truth, the temporalizing of experience, which is also always temporizing. We never make it home. It is not the inner that is strange: "seltsam," as Wittgenstein keeps calling it. The inner, if we could really reach it, would be presence, the vision of the Forms, the mind at home. But we never do. We are caught in externality, not happily, but as our inalienable alienation from what we have always sought. Thus in *La Voix et le Phénomène* Derrida shows how Husserl tries vainly to reduce language to the purely expressive, to the expression of what is "*évident*," but without ever being able to eliminate its *indicative* role. In *Grammatologie* he quotes Peirce's dictum, "We think only in signs"—a self-externalization that never comes to rest in easy union with what the signs are *of*. For Wittgenstein the *working* of language

permits us—or should permit us—to abandon the vain search for univocal correlation whether of signs and things or of signs and mental events. Neither the inner nor the outer aim of language matters. They are fused or cancelled. There is no problem left. For Derrida, however, there is no such cancellation, or fusion, ever. Presence haunts us, inevitably, but there *is* no presence, only absence. Austin's performatives, he argues, can only be said to succeed because they can also fail. And indeed, he insists, in a sense they always do. For language, which is said to lead to presentation, always falls into representation. *Every* form of speech is quotable, and quotability entails absence. It is the very gap between inner and outer which is also a gap between now and then, or then and now, that makes language what it is. Could we close it, we would be silent with the silence of beasts or gods perhaps, but not of men.

The contrast of inner and outer, as Derrida elaborates it, is identified further with the contrast between speech and writing. This contrast, everywhere reiterated, constitutes in fact his chief innovative theme. His major work is entitled "On Grammatology." "Différance," neither a word nor a concept, he insists—so I don't know what to call it—"différance" is developed out of reflection on "écriture." What does Wittgenstein make of this contrast? He ignores it totally. If you look at the language games of the *Investigations*, some are written, some spoken, it doesn't seem to matter a bit. For Derrida, in contrast, nothing matters more. Nothing else even matters at all. There was the philosophers' ideal of the perfect moment of speech: for Plato the living soul could learn through recollection to *see* the Forms. Rousseau recounts the mythical occasion when living souls met one another in the perfect moment of the first words spoken at some rustic spring. But there never was such a moment. Language is always the trace of a trace. Even spoken words must linger in the air, a kind of skywriting. Sounds become words only when repeatable. The unique, perfect expression of perfect presence has never been and could never be. Language is already *text*; never present, always the *différance*: spatialization, conflict, temporalization, temporizing; gaps, gaps, gaps.

Wittgenstein argued: no private language, because only language in public works. Language must be public because that's where it succeeds. Derrida argues, on the contrary, yes, language must

indeed be public—texts to be repeated, texts to be read, and mis-read—language must be public, because it always fails. Language is our hamartia, our missing of the mark. The moment we speak we introduce not a well-oiled machine, but a species-specific neurosis. We invoke, like Oedipus, a self-referential curse. Our very riddle-solving ingenuity triggers—*has* triggered, when the show begins—the coming of the plague, which only our self-blinding can remove.

More frills, you'll say. Is this philosophy? Yes and no. After all, both Derrida and Wittgenstein want to show us what philosophy *can't* do. But let me try another contrast: the contrast of explicit and implicit. Wittgenstein recurrently attacks the notion that language needs to go by exact rules, not, however, like Merleau-Ponty, for example, because of some trailing meaning that lags behind them. Do we, he asks in *Zettel*, hear the music—and *then* the expression? We don't need exact rules, not because of some underlying depths that escape them, but because the context decides. Operations operate where it fits them to do so. The very contrast, and so the conception of the "explicit" or "exact" is unnecessary to the way language games in fact go on. For Derrida, however, the Platonic or Saussurian or especially Husserlian ideal of truly precise meaning, the coalescence of thought with presence, still appears as the *telos* of language, and what we have in its failure is the failure of the totally explicit—of language as pure expression. But in this situation the explicit, which should have been the inner, turns round and assumes the place of the outer—the writing—which remains always at some remove from the inner, which should have been explicit, but never is. The play between the trace—the writing, absent from meaning, and the implicit—the thought that is meant, but never unequivocally achieved: this to-and-fro between *signifiant* and *signifié*, in one direction or another, in every direction, never comes finally to a halt. We are always saying, never quite what we mean. And we always mean, never quite what we say. It is, I should think, the coalescence of rule and operation as Wittgenstein adjures us to practise it that is, for Derrida, a philosophical will-o-the-wisp. All we *have*, in the end, is traces of traces, inscriptions separable and indeed separated from their import. Even spoken language is a kind of primordial script, an *archi-écriture*. Moreover, though language does indeed work only in context, contexts themselves are never self-contained. Relative to the

expression intended, they are fragments only—the place of adumbrations, echoes of what one meant to say.

This is odd, come to think of it. Wittgenstein wrote in fragments, *Zettel* is his style, while Derrida fashions essays of polished, Mallarméan elegance. But Wittgenstein's fragments *direct* us to language in its whole and wholesome operations in the world, while Derrida's beautifully turned phrases lure us into an unending maze of subtleties from which there seems no rescue into ordinary talk.

Let's leave that oddity and look at yet another contrast in the treatment of language: the contrast between literal and metaphorical use. Wittgenstein uses metaphors liberally in his own writing: engines idle, language goes on holiday, the ice of logic is slippery; flies buzz in fly-bottles, cities have suburbs, and so on. Indeed, both the "picture" and "game" theories themselves are metaphors, as is the "family" concept. But so far as I can recall he doesn't deal with the question of metaphor as such. The language he is concerned to free from philosophic cramp is chiefly everyday talk about toothaches, pieces of cheese, and such. Derrida, on the other hand, not only cares little for the speech of the man in the street, and prefers to delve straight into philosophic or literary theories of language, but when he does talk about "ordinary" words or "ordinary" usage, his aim is to show, as I mentioned about his discussion of Austin, that even here things are not as simple as they appear. And in particular: that even in what looks like literal language, metaphor lingers. Univocal meaning, like the moment of pure, living speech, is a conceptual ideal rather than the reality we live with—or in. Not that this is just another theory of "open texture" or of vagueness in language. It is a question of the interplay of meanings which may in themselves be more or less literal, as well as more or less "metaphorical," the former, for instance, in Derrida's own use of the several meanings of "*différer*," the latter, for example, in the "metaphorical" carry-over of one meaning into another in such traditional philosophical concepts as "theory" or in the phrase "natural light." In the rhetorical tradition it was held, following Aristotle, that metaphor should be restricted to the sphere of the mimetic; outside the arts, where one wants to state propositional truth, metaphorical use is taboo. But, Derrida insists, there is never *the* last, and therefore *the* literal, word for anything, not even as Heidegger seems to hope, for "Being." Language is

always loose enough to retain some transfer—some *metapherein*—between senses, some poetical resonance. We are caught up, whether we will or no, in the play of words which is the play of the world.

I have been talking so far about distinctions between kinds of, or aspects of, linguistic activity: outer vs. inner processes; language spoken or written; explicit vs. implicit sense or meaning; literal language as against metaphor. I come now to a contrast between language itself and something other than speech but related to it: to the contrast between speech and gesture. In the *Confessions* passage from which we started, you will remember, Augustine remarks that the grown-ups show their intentions by their bodily movements, “as it were,” he remarks parenthetically, “the natural words of all peoples,” (*tamquam verbis naturalibus omnium gentium*). Wittgenstein makes little of this parenthesis at the outset, yet it plays an important role in his whole enterprise (some of the notes in *Zettel* bring this out especially clearly). Gesture is natural language, as it were. Language is then a sort of artificial gesture. If we put it back into the context of movement from which it sprang, we may free it from the immobilizing influence of philosophy and get it going again in its right and proper way. “Proper”: there might be a whole Derridaan excursus there, but let me stay for now with Wittgenstein: let language come unstuck, let it work naturally once more. Hence the “form of life” formula: natural ways of movement, forms of going on, are the controlling medium, the limits, of the artifacts of culture, including words. Nature controls culture, or ought to control it.

Derrida’s move, again, is just the opposite of this. Husserl, he points out, considered gesture external to language because it is not *said*, only done. But the universality of the indicative as against the expressive role of language shows that the moment of pure presence is unreachable; there is always a sort of trailing of the indicative, of the pointing aspect of speech behind what is truly to be expressed. If presence were attainable, that would indeed be “natural language,” like Rousseau’s imagined first moment of speaking at the spring. Far from showing us, therefore, that language is a natural activity, the omnipresence of the indicative, of gesture—the omnipresence of absence, if you will—betrays the fact that language is wholly artificial: a product of culture through and through. We gesticulate through words in their referring, as against their expressive, func-

tion—as Novalis put it, language is language of mouth and fingers: “Mund und Fingersprache.” We mime at one another in the antics of social role-playing, including the social roles of language, Wittgenstein’s *Sprachspiele*, because the pure expression of our thought, the natural aim of language, always eludes us. Wittgenstein is content, at least on the surface (I can’t dismiss entirely Findlay’s interpretation), to put the conventions of ordinary usage “normally” and “naturally” to work. He seems to be satisfied, with Hume, that custom is second nature. Grease the machinery and let it rip: men have always taken naturally to their machines, become part of them: bows and arrows, boats, cars, planes, languages. So they have, Derrida would answer, but isn’t that so precisely because we have no nature, because everything human is something made? Custom may indeed be second nature, but can we ask with Montaigne: what if nature were but first custom?

Of course we can turn this reversal round again. If, as it does, our very nature needs culture, then culture is nature; our nature. Even what is natural to us can only become what it is through cultural artifacts, which thus turn out, like *Sprachspiele*, to be natural after all. One can take it either way. Yet the difference in emphasis is glaring. Where Wittgenstein wants to restore the artifacts of language to their natural unreflective roles, or family of roles, Derrida wants to show us that hope for a natural human life is vain: the artificial dominates the natural and holds it in abeyance with every step we take—certainly with every word we utter.

Nature is life. The roles Wittgenstein and Derrida assign to life and death may furnish us with one more and, it seems to me, culminating, contrast between their views of language. What does the word “life” (strictly *Leben* and *vie* respectively) mean to each of them? What does this key word do in their respective prescriptions for treating our philosophic ills? Physicians in general are supposed to want to save life and to fight the enemy death. So it seems to be with Wittgensteinian therapy. Language games of every style from mathematics to religion must be freed from the self-consciousness that philosophical reflection chronically produces and let live again, each in its own way. Philosophy is a kind of stage-fright; that’s death, or at least the image of death. We should learn to master it. We should learn to be able to abandon reflection when we like and get

on with the job. Philosophy, compared to ordinary goings-on, is deathlike; it tries to stop the game in the midst of play. Forget it, or try to forget it. Let life go on.

Yet of course Wittgenstein recognizes the existence of another notion of "life," that alleged secret "inner process," whatever life it is that belongs to the beetle in the box. In *Zettel* he writes:

One might say: in all cases one means by "thought" what is *living* in the sentence. That without which it is dead, a mere sound-sequence or sequence of written shapes.

Then he gives his chess example, and continues:

Or what if we spoke of a something that distinguishes paper money from mere printed slips of paper and gives it its meaning, its life!

But that is very like what, in Derrida's account, Husserl meant by life. It is in that sense, or one allied to it, that phenomenology appears as a "philosophy of life." That is also the meaning, I should say, of Sartre's "le vécu." For if there is life, as against machinery, in the Cartesian tradition (and both Husserl and Sartre are die-hard Cartesians), it can only be the secret life of the soul, the pure lucid moment of the *cogitatio* in the very presence of the Being it knows. Now admittedly, both Wittgenstein and Derrida are counter-Cartesians; but, as we have seen, their accounts of the "secret inner life" and their ways of dealing with it are as far apart as they could be in both their direction and their style.

Wittgenstein wants to displace "life" from inner not to outer, but to ordinary—which is neither "in" nor "out," neither hidden "subject" nor lifeless "object," but just the way things naturally do work. Thus the alleged inner "life," when held fast, is a kind of death; to come to life is to ignore it—to ignore beetles in boxes and their like and go on talking, in the appropriate way for appropriate contexts, as real live human beings indeed do.

Derrida, however, is taking that ideal, never-existent inner life as an inescapable, if unfulfillable, *telos* of language and of our "lives" as language-users. If we could realize that goal, he admits, this would be both absolute life and total death. Yet, in contrast to Wittgen-

stein's "forms of life" message, I think it's fair to say that what Derrida chiefly wants to show us is the hand of death in speech as against the life we seek but never find. He wants to protect us from the ideal of life, which in fulfillment would be death, by showing us the role of death in the only life we have. Thus the constant thesis, in his view, from the *Phaedrus* to Saussure, of the unique superiority of *living* speech, can only be corrected by the counterthesis: the possibility of language depends upon the possibility of death. Hence his insistence on writing, on the grammatic as essential to speech itself. He does not mean, of course, that people wrote before they spoke. His is not an historical thesis in that sense—though it is a thesis about the *possibility* of history, of *Geschichtlichkeit*, to borrow Heidegger's term. We do learn from the dead, after all. True, a wild child (if there ever was one) on its own would never learn to speak and hence would never become human. We need the mediation of living language-users to initiate us into the language-borne, as well as language-born, historical, human, social world. But *what* do our elders teach us? What did little Augustine learn from the grown-ups? His mother-tongue, an invisible, indeed inaudible, machine transmitted at a countless sequence of maternal knees, long turned to clay. Speech (*parole*) is of the living, but language (*langue*), which precedes speech, operates through death. It not only transcends death, it needs death to work as it does, to be what it is. Each living moment is unique; but the very quintessence of words is repeatability, non-uniqueness, and that is the nature of writing, of the text, which is not lived, which in itself indeed is dead, yet survives the moment of writing, can indeed even survive the writer. Even Shakespeare's death didn't kill the English tongue—though, admittedly, life with the mass media may. That's by the way, or maybe it isn't. For the point is: what matters most in language is not speaking speech (as Merleau-Ponty called it), but the texts we leave: that is, the habits of speech, whether strictly "written down" or not, that will have become established ways of talking for those not yet living, who will—God help them—have learned from us. And habits, *hexeis*, remember, are second actualities, worked up possibilities of action—but still possibilities, not acts themselves. Language is defined as texts to be read, not the very act of reading, let alone of speaking purely out of one's heart. If language were really *verbum cordis*, there would be none

at all; silent prayer perhaps, but no talk. Plato called writing poison to the soul; but, Derrida argues, he *had* to find it also a drug (*pharmakon*) in the benign as well as in the injurious sense. Why else, one may ask, did he keep writing when he hated it so? Saussure called writing "language in drag": "*L'écriture voile la vue de la langue: elle n'est pas un vêtement mais un travestissement.*" But his compulsive search for anagrams, for a secret writing behind the writing, suggests that he took it very seriously indeed. And it demands to be taken seriously precisely because the life of speech begins only with that death of the word which writing represents. Represents, since writing, like any linguistic phenomenon, is never *presented* purely. Maybe the only pure poem is the "*Fisches Nachtgesang*" of Morgenstern, and even it, though I can't quote it, is repeatable in print. Biologically, or genetically considered, life can go on forever, but human life, the life of tradition and of language, is mediated by death.

We have been looking, spottily, at two divergent ways of facing a single quandary: the immobilizing of our minds by the action on them of our inherited philosophy of language. If I ask in conclusion why the methods of these two writers, faced with the same problem, are so contrary, I can only suggest a very obvious, indeed a platitudinous, answer. Both Wittgenstein and Derrida, we've noticed, are counter-Cartesians. They both emphatically *disbelieve*, at least at the linguistic level. I still want to leave open the possibility that Findlay may be right—that Wittgenstein may have been a secret, and so silent, mystic; or secret, and so silent, solipsist—but at the linguistic level they both disbelieve in the Cartesian moment of truth, the inwardly self-warranting clear and distinct idea. Wittgenstein, however, came to these problems through Russell and Moore, the heirs of Hume, the last empiricists, whose search for pure atomic impressions motivated their philosophizing, even in occasional (though of course gentlemanly) rebellion against that aim of thought. This is, originally, the would-be objective and, ultimately, the phenomenalist issue of Cartesianism. Derrida, on the contrary, comes through Husserl out of the idealist branch of the Cartesian family, even if with the help of Nietzsche (let alone Freud and Marx) he rebels violently, or at least with the rhetoric of violence, against that demi-tradition. The two branches have, of course, like all cousins, something in common.

Empiricism becomes idealist despite itself. Hume is Berkeley without God. In that case, perhaps, as many philosophers now like to argue, phenomenism is but phenomenology in everyday (that is, of course, English) dress, while phenomenology is phenomenism in the ceremonial robes of continental *ex cathedra* utterance. But if one is caught in the trap of looking for passive bits of experience—pains, inner happenings, momentary knowings how or that—one has to try to get out and act. That is the right kind of therapy for that kind of cramp. And if, on the other hand, one is fascinated by the serpent idealism, by the Transcendental Ego, one has, as therapy, to look elsewhere: to seek one's antidote, not in escape, which is impossible, but in a kind of stretching here and there, a snake-charmer's dance, as it were—a recognition of one's trancelike state through making of it a kind of game with language, in language; a game, or a battle, of inner with outer, implicit with explicit, expression with gesture, life with death.

Yet opposite though these prescriptions feel when we read of them or try to practice them, they have, finally, one more character in common. They are both Wonderland philosophies. They both exhort us to work terribly hard, to run terribly fast, in order to stay where we are. Maybe that's the only new beginning we can manage. The ice *is* slippery, after all.

E.M. Cioran

ENCOUNTERS WITH BECKETT

To perceive the sort of *separate* man that Beckett is, one would have to ponder the expression “to stand apart”—his tacit motto of every moment—its implications of solitude and subterranean obstinacy, of being on the outside, implacably pursuing some endless task. The Buddhists say of one who tends towards illumination that he must be as relentless as “a mouse gnawing a coffin.” Every true writer is engaged in such an effort: he is a destroyer who *adds* to existence, who enriches it while undermining it.

* * *

“Our allotted time on earth is not long enough to be used for anything other than ourselves.” This remark by a poet is applicable to anyone who refuses the extrinsic, the accidental, the *other*. Beckett, or the incomparable art of being oneself. Yet with this, no apparent pride, and no sign of the stigmata manifesting an awareness of a unique predicament: if the word “amenity” did not exist, one would have to invent it for him. Hardly to be believed, almost unnatural: he never disparages anyone, he seems unaware of the hygienic function of spite—its salutary possibilities, its usefulness as an outlet. I have never heard him belittle friends or enemies. That’s one form of superiority for which I pity him, and which must make him suffer unconsciously. If I were prevented from maligning people, what agitation and uneasiness, what complications I could expect!

And yet, amenity does not exclude exasperation. At dinner with some friends, while they showered him with uselessly erudite questions about himself and his work, he took refuge in complete silence and finally even turned his back to us—or almost did. The dinner was not yet over when he rose and left, preoccupied and gloomy, as one might be just before surgery or the torture chamber.

* * *

He does not live in time but parallel to time. That is why it never occurred to me to ask him what he thought of such and such an event. He is one of those beings who makes you realize that history is a dimension man could have dispensed with.

* * *

Even if he were like his heroes, even if he had never known success, he would still have been exactly the same. He gives the impression of never wanting to assert himself at all, of being estranged from notions of success and failure equally. "How hard it is to figure him out! And what class he has!" That's what I say to myself every time I think of him. If, by some impossible chance, he were hiding no secrets at all, to my eyes he would still appear inscrutable.

I come from a corner of Europe where effusiveness, lack of inhibition, immediate unsolicited shameless avowals are the rule, where one knows everything about everybody, where living with other people is equivalent to a public confessional, where secrets in fact are inconceivable and where volubility borders on delirium.

This alone would suffice to explain why I was to fall under the spell of a man who is uncannily discrete.

* * *

About five years ago, we met by chance on Rue Guynemer; he asked if I were working, and I told him that I had lost my taste for work, that I didn't see the necessity of bestirring myself, of "producing," that writing was an ordeal for me. . . . He seemed astonished by this, and I myself was even more astonished when, precisely in reference to writing, he spoke of *joy*. Did he really use that word? Yes, I am sure of it. At the same moment I recalled that at our first meeting, some ten years earlier at the Closerie des Lilas, he had confessed to me his great weariness, the feeling he had that nothing could be squeezed out of words anymore.

Words—will anyone love them as much as he has? They are his companions and his sole support. This man who takes no certitude for granted—one feels how confident and secure he is among them. His fits of discouragement undoubtedly coincide with the moments when he ceases to believe in them, when he feels they are failing him, eluding him. Without them, he is left dispossessed, he is nowhere. I regret not having marked and counted all the passages in his work where he refers to words, where he reflects upon words—"drops of silence in silence," as they are described in *The Unnam-*

able—symbols of fragility transformed into indestructible foundations.

* * *

The French text *Sans* is called *Lessness* in English, a word coined by Beckett like its German equivalent, *Losigkeit*.

Fascinated by this word *Lessness* (as unfathomable as Boehme's *Ungrund*), I told Beckett one evening that I would not go to bed before finding an honorable equivalent for it in French. . . . Together we had considered all possible forms suggested by *sans* and *moindre*. None of them seemed to us to come near the notion of the inexhaustible lessness, a combination of loss and infinitude, an emptiness linked with apotheosis. Somewhat disappointed, we parted company. Back at home, I kept on turning that poor *sans* over and over in my mind. Just as I was about to give up, the idea came to me that I ought to try some derivation of the Latin *sine*. The next day I wrote to Beckett that *sinéité* seemed to me to be the yearned-for word. He replied that he too had thought of it, perhaps at the same moment. But in the end our lucky find failed to satisfy us. We finally agreed that we ought to give up the search, that there was no noun in French capable of expressing absence in itself, pure unadulterated absence, and that we had to resign ourselves to the metaphysical poverty of a preposition.

* * *

With writers who have nothing to say, who do not possess a world of their own, one talks only about literature. With him, very rarely; in fact almost never. Any everyday topic (concrete problems, annoyances of all kinds) interests him more—in conversation, of course. What he cannot tolerate, at any rate, are questions like: do you think this or that work is destined to last? That this one or that deserves its reputation? Of X and Y, which one will survive, which is the greater? All evaluations of this sort try his patience and depress him. "What's the point of all that?" he said to me after a particularly unpleasant evening, when the discussion at dinner had resembled a grotesque version of the Last Judgment. He himself avoids expressing opinions about his books and plays: what's important to him are not obstacles that have been overcome, but those yet to be faced. He merges totally with whatever he is working on. If one asks him about a play in progress, he will not linger over the content or the meaning, but over the interpretation, whose most insignificant details he visualizes minute by minute (I was about to say second by second). I will not soon forget his spirited explanation of the requirements to be satisfied by an actress wishing to play *Not I*, in which

a single breathless voice dominates space and substitutes itself for it. How his eyes gleamed as he *saw* that mouth, insignificant and yet invading, omnipresent! One would have thought he was witnessing the ultimate metamorphosis, the supreme downfall of Pythia!

* * *

Having been fond of cemeteries all my life, and knowing that Beckett liked them too (*First Love*, one may recall, begins with the description of a cemetery, which is, incidentally, the one in Hamburg), I was telling him last winter, on the Avenue de l'Observatoire, about a recent visit to the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, and about my indignation at not finding Proust on the list of "celebrities" buried there. (I first discovered Beckett's name, by the way, thirty years ago in the American Library, when I came across his little book on Proust one day.) I don't know how we ended up discussing Swift, although now that I think about it there was nothing unusual about the transition, given the funereal nature of his mockery. Beckett told me that he was rereading the *Travels*, and that he had a predilection for the "Country of the Houyhnhnms"—especially for the scene in which Gulliver is mad with terror and disgust at the approach of a Yahoo female. He informed me—and this was a great surprise to me, above all a great disappointment—that Joyce hadn't cared for Swift. Moreover, he added, contrary to what people think, Joyce had no inclination whatsoever towards satire. "He never rebelled, he was detached, he accepted everything. For him, *there was absolutely no difference between a bomb falling and a leaf falling. . . .*"

A remarkable judgment, reminding me in its sharpness and unsettling suggestiveness of an observation made by Armand Robin in response to a question I once asked him: "Why, after having translated so many poets, where you never tempted by Chang-Tsu, whose writings, among those of all the sages, are the most thoroughly pervaded by poetry?" "I have thought about doing it often," he replied, "but how can you translate a work that can only be compared to the *stark landscape of northern Scotland?*"

* * *

How many times, since I have known Beckett, have I asked myself (an obsessive and rather stupid question, I admit) what sort of relationship there might be between him and his characters? What could they have in common? Can anyone imagine a more radical disparity? Must one assume that not only their existence, but his also, is bathed in that "leaden light" noted in *Malone Dies*? More than one passage of his seems to me like a monologue

after the end of some cosmic epoch. The sensation of entering a posthumous universe, a geography dreamed up by a demon, stripped of everything, even of his curse!

Beings who do not know whether they are alive or not, and who are prey to an immense fatigue, to a fatigue that *is not of this world* (to use a language that runs counter to Beckett's taste), all conceived by a man whom one senses is vulnerable, who wears, for the sake of decency, a mask of invulnerability. Not long ago I had, in a flash, a vision of the bonds that unite them with their author, with their accomplice. . . . What I saw, or rather what I felt, in that instant, cannot be translated into an intelligible formula. Nevertheless, since then the slightest remark from a hero of his reminds me of the inflections of a certain voice. . . . But I hasten to add that a revelation can be as fragile and as deceptive as a theory.

* * *

Right from our first meeting, I realized that he had reached the extreme limit, that perhaps he had started there, at the impossible, the extraordinary, at an impasse. And what is admirable is that he has *stood fast*. Having arrived at the outset up against a wall, he perseveres as gallantly as he always has: extremity as a *point of departure*. the end as advent! Hence the feeling that this world of his, this transfixed, dying world, could go on indefinitely, even if ours were to disappear.

* * *

I am not particularly attracted to Wittgenstein's philosophy, but I have a passion for the man. Everything I read about him has the power to move me. More than once I have found common traits between him and Beckett. Two mysterious apparitions, two phenomena pleasing in their inscrutability. In both, the same distance from beings and things, the same inflexibility, the same temptation to silence, to a final repudiation of words, the same impulse to move up against boundaries never sensed before. In another time, they would have been drawn to the desert. We now know that Wittgenstein had, at one time, considered entering a monastery. As for Beckett, one can very easily imagine him, a few centuries back, in a bare cell unsullied by any decoration, not even by a crucifix. If you think I am going too far, remember the faraway, enigmatic, "inhuman" look he has in certain photographs.

* * *

Our beginnings count, that goes without saying, but we only take the decisive step toward ourselves when we no longer have an *origin*, and when we offer just as little subject matter for a biography as God does. . . . It is important, and at the same time it is not important at all, that Beckett is Irish. What is certainly false is to claim that he is the "perfect example of an Anglo-Saxon." At any rate, nothing displeases him more. Is this because of the unpleasant memories he still has of his prewar stay in London? I suspect that he finds the English guilty of "commonness." That verdict—which he has not expressed but which I am expressing in his place like a summary of his reservations, if not his actual resentments—I cannot myself personally subscribe to, and this all the more so because, doubtless due to a Balkan illusion, the English seem to me to be the most devitalized and most menaced, and therefore the most refined and civilized of peoples.

And yet, Beckett, who curiously enough feels completely at home in France, actually has no affinity whatever with a certain hardness that is eminently French (Parisian, to be more precise). Is it not significant that he has put Chamfort into verse? (Not all of Chamfort, true, but a few maxims.) The enterprise, remarkable in itself and almost inconceivable when one considers the absence of lyric spirit that characterizes the skeletal prose of the Moralists, signifies an avowal of the profoundly lyrical character of Beckett's mind: it is always in spite of themselves that restrained intelligences betray the depth of their natures.

* * *

I believe him to be as deliberate as a fanatic. Even if the world were to collapse, he would neither abandon work in progress nor change his subject. As far as essentials are concerned, he certainly cannot be swayed. In everything else, in inessential matters, he is defenseless, probably weaker than any of us, weaker even than his characters. Before writing these few notes, I proposed to myself to reread what Meister Eckhardt and Nietzsche had written, from different perspectives, about "the noble man." I did not carry out my project, but I have not forgotten for a moment that I contemplated it.

* * *

*Translated from the French by
Raymond Federman and
Jean M. Sommermeyer*

Alicia Ostriker

PAUL GOODMAN

Nobody can claim that Paul Goodman's verse is "poetic." It resembles Wallace Stevens, say, not at all—or as a handsaw resembles porcelain. It has no *persona*, merely a person. And as like as not the person is miserably praying "Creator Spirit come," hoping the Holy Ghost will accept a sexual pun, so he can get on with saving the world. "Camerado, this is no book," warned Whitman at the close of *Leaves of Grass*. "Who touches this touches a man." That isn't quite true for Whitman, whose large rhetoric and sexual disguises make the man less palpable than the prophet. It is quite true for Paul Goodman. There has not been a thoughtful and passionate personal voice like this in our poetry since Robinson Jeffers, or in England since D.H. Lawrence. If we want to touch a man, Goodman makes himself fully available. But do we want to? And is that Art?

Paul Goodman was born on September 9, 1911 in Greenwich Village, and died August 2, 1972, in New Hampshire. His father deserted the family in Paul's infancy; his mother was a bohemian; his older brother Percival, with whom he later wrote *Communitas*, left home early, and he was raised by his sister Alice, to whom he dedicated the first book of *The Empire City*. He attended Hebrew schools, and graduated from City College in the depression year 1931, but also hitchhiked to courses at Harvard, and sneaked into Columbia to hear philosophy professor Richard McKeon lecture. For a young bud on the long vine of the Jewish-agnostic-radical intelligentsia, Goodman chose a curious pair of masters: Aristotle, who taught him to observe human institutions, and Kant, who taught him the moral imperative. There would also be Marx—but Paul became an Anarchist rather than a Communist; Freud—but he firmly rejected the value of sublimation; Reich, teaching the connection of libido and political life, whence Goodman moved naturally to gestalt psychology (he became a lay therapist in the fifties); the American pragmatists John Dewey and William James; the Chinese sages; Maimonides, Buber—all from whom he could derive "the same philosophy" of "the concrete, the finite, the intrinsic."

Invited by McKeon to teach English at Chicago while earning a doctorate, he was fired for homosexuality in 1940, just after completing his Aristotelian *Structure of Literature*. Later, Black Mountain would fire him for the same reason. He had been, he said, bisexual since the age of twelve. Eager to preach what he practised, he would always defend (see, for example, the story "The Old Knight") the value of Eros in the teaching process.

For over twenty-five years, Paul lived with his common-law wife, Sally. They had two daughters, Susan and Daisy, and a son, Matthew Ready, (whose death mountain-climbing in 1967 was a grief from which he did not recover; although he wrote, therapeutically, many poems of mourning). "Until 1953 we lived in the lowest 10th—like Southern sharecroppers—at \$1500 to \$2000 a year," he boasted. "Decent poverty is really an ideal environment for serious people."

Hanging around New York, among its intellectuals, political subgroups, literary and artistic cliques, or young street hoodlums; nosing through City Hall or cruising bars, bicycling manuscripts to editors to save postage (the bicycle was succeeded by a Lambretta, about which he has some charming verses), he wrote like a force of nature: poems, plays, stories, novels; essays in city planning, social criticism, psychology, education. In the end, according to the author's count, there were forty books. The work was admired by a fanatic few, but otherwise neglected or dismissed. *Growing Up Absurd*, after rejection by a dozen publishers, made Goodman nationally famous at age forty-nine. *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals*, *The Community of Scholars*, and *Compulsory Mis-Education, People or Personnel*, the gloomy autobiographical *Five Years: Thoughts during a Useless Time*, the wry *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative*, and the return to literary theory in *Speaking and Language: Defense of Poetry*, were still to come. Meanwhile, like Thomas Hardy, Goodman thought himself primarily a poet, writing verse profuse and private—had to do it, like a reflex—and since literary magazines rarely accepted it, he showed it round to friends. Hardy's poetry was first published when he was fifty-nine—his own choice. Goodman was unable to publish a volume of poetry until he was past fifty. This was *The Lordly Hudson* (Macmillan, 1962), followed by *Hawkweed* (Random House, 1967), *North Percy* (Black Sparrow, 1968), *Homespun of Oatmeal Grey* (Random House, 1970), and the verse of *Little Prayers and Finite Experience* (Harper & Row, 1972). The *Collected Poems*, edited by Taylor Stoehr, and with a memoir by George Dennison, appeared shortly after Goodman's death in 1973.

"I am a humanist, and everything I do has the same subject—the organism and the environment. Anything I write is pragmatic—it aims to accomplish something." One is tempted to say that Goodman's ideas, as

social critic and practical Utopian, were simply, usually right. At least, they were always humane, having always in mind the single question of what can be done to make American lives more whole, more free. Not systematically theoretical (Goodman is not an *original* philosopher, but an absorber of what feeds his cravings), Goodman's thoughts branch from only a few large boughs: the stress on eliminating bigness in favor of decentralization and autonomy, the insistence that human beings need meaningful work they can be proud of, the pleas for less ideology and more human-scale contact. His root moral assumption is that happiness is good for people. "Happiness, not merely a reward for virtue, is itself a virtue," he quotes Spinoza. When people did not agree, he wrote like a bright and good child confronted by the irrationality of human badness. Why do Americans want to harm each other and themselves? Stubbornly, he does not see the point. He himself is made perfectly happy by music, love, work, and handball; therefore why do these idiots make the ugly cities and the abominable wars? Why don't they stop when he points out their silliness and a cheap remedy? His irritation was Thoreau's: Is it necessary that we live so ill? His chief weakness, of course, was that he really believed—World Wars notwithstanding—in what used to be called "the basic goodness of human nature." Although the street-wise stance of his prose style disguises this, he could in fact make no allowance for the *irreducibly* greedy, power-hungry, and destructive components of human nature.

In the prose, we attend partly to Goodman's ideas, partly to the earnest personal commitment behind them. In the poetry, we are not led to examine ideas as such, but to see in detail, what it felt like to be a man who pounded away at "my poisoned one, my world" for those forty-odd years, despite acknowledging that it would not, in public or private, much profit him:

I am distraught with longing for Paradise
and convinced that it is unattainable for me.

Goodman liked to quote Goethe saying that the greatest verse was occasional. Although he did write sometimes on themes outside of himself, such as music, heroes, classical figures, or nature, the overwhelming bulk of his poetry was situational and personal, chips struck from the wood.

He does not as a rule write about his recreations. A pity, since report has it that he could play at life exuberantly. "Handball," a little gem about licking some Puerto Rican youths with calculated fast shots in the corners, is relatively exceptional. He does write of his duties: "Foster excellence. If I do not/ Who will do it?" he asks himself. Or: "Fucking Sally just to give

her a baby/ and loving Johnny just to make him happy . . . and writing sermons to the Americans/ because if I will not, who will do it?" To be useful makes Goodman happy, obviously. And to be rejected makes him miserable. Balked in his will, he feels frustration, exhaustion, stupidity, inability—"My countrymen have now become too base,/ I give them up," "I've come to hate, it is appalling,/ Adam I used to love" (Adam is mankind), "and I give no joy at all to anybody"—over which he suffers, until next time: "oh today/ I'll bring low those insolent giraffes!" (The giraffes in this case are General Motors and the F.B.I.). When lonely, he talks to God, in whom he does not believe, but whom he considers responsible for his gifts and burdens. He writes many "little prayers" asking endurance and patience.

As a subjective moralist, we can link Goodman through Wordsworth to Milton (cf. especially Sonnets 7 and 19, the introspections of a duty-driven being), after whom he wrote many political sonnets, ("these hand-me-downs of Milton's that I wear") some of them of almost unbearable poignancy. In "Flags, 1967," for example:

How well they flew together side by side
the Stars and Stripes my red and white and blue
and my Black Flag the sovereignty of no
man or law! They were the flags of pride
and nature and advanced with equal stride
across the age when Jefferson long ago
saluted both and said "Let Shays' men go.
If you discourage mutiny and riot
what check is there on government?"

Today

the gaudy flag is very grand on earth
and they have sewed on it a golden border,
but I will not salute it. At our rally
I see a small black flag of little worth
and touch it wistfully. Chaos is Order.

Not Miltonic at all, on the other hand, is Goodman's ability to score large psycho-socio-political points by small talk, as in this neat dialogue-with-swallowed smile:

What are they doing? Making a thread
of sand to sew the shards together.
Won't that at least keep them busy?
No, frustration leads to aggression.
What are you doing? As you see,
we are giving a press conference.
Don't you get frustrated too?
Yes, but we are pacifists.

Next to Goodman's, other political poetry of our time somehow pales. Bly during the Vietnam War raged nobly but self-righteously beyond the fray; Lowell in the *Notebooks* fussed over whether he should or should not climb gingerly off the Brahmin pedestal; even Ginsberg, attired in guru mantle, seems relatively self-luxuriating. In prose, Mailer's journalism explores the personal tumescences and detumescences of political engagement brilliantly—but what exactly are Mailer's principles?

If we want writing which presents the struggle to create and maintain a whole self consistent with moral (or even immoral) ideals, and to embody that self in language useful to others, we can read a number of black and women writers. But black and women writers do not love their country (why should they? it is not loveable, especially to them), and it happens Goodman did.

I dream my country
has quit her desperate course
and is now at peace

my people now take
a lively satisfaction
in one another

my people greet me
when I walk out the doorway
well pleased with myself

That was not rational, and he knew it.

But I have
no choice.
I do not need to carry my task through,
neither am I free to give it up.

"Goodman," as Susan Sontag remarks, "was our Sartre."

At the same time, of course, Goodman is a terrific love poet. So far as he is concerned, sex is an absolute good. Naturally, since it makes people happy, or at least it should. As he has St. Patrick opine in a comic ballad:

I never found, not I,
when I was young and incontinent,
that my reservoir ran dry,
or it kept me from becoming a saint

—the contrary! the more you come
the more you can. Period.

“Rosy my cock” appears frequently, usually in misadventures. Goodman has a lot to say about the mathematical disappointments of the everlasting hard-on, but it spring ever-eager, in bars, in planes, and on the college lecture circuit. Some of the poet’s amours are female; most are male and young. One poem called “Youth and Age” begins, “Like a hot stone your cock weighs on mine, young man.” It goes on, the thoughtful mind ticking,

I am surprised you lust for a greyhead like me
and what a waste for me to grapple so much pleasure
with sliding palms holding your thin body
firmly while you squirm, till it is time to come.

Come, lad . . .

and concludes wistfully

It is quiet on his little boat. “He’s a noisy lover,”
I notice idly—the April air is keen—
“but he has no human speech.” It’s I who say
the words like “I love you” or “Thank you.”

If Whitman won’t spill all the beans about the manly love of comrades, Goodman will. But when things go merrily, an encounter with a Welshman on a handball court ends in bed, where we “make love instead of war” (this is in 1941, the beginning of World War II). Paul and a lanky buddy having fun in a car conquer the ire of a traffic cop in the Anacreon-imitation “In Traffic”; pleasure and generosity occur, even love does, and the poet thinks back to conclude that his lust “made me comrades, as if, in so far, / we had a decent city.”

Fictionally, Goodman sometimes creates a half-fantasy situation which is a positive inversion of Kafka’s fictive premises. Everything is realistic, except the people are wiser and softer than in our world; in these dreams (e.g. “A Celebration,” “The Break-Up of Our Camp”), Goodman considers what “intrinsic” or “necessary” joys and sorrows would remain if the world were a little closer to his heart’s desire. The interpenetration of fantasy and reality rests just below the surface of his poetry, with the fantasy always a matter of what he thinks could really be for people:

You ask what is the bay with the statue
down there and the new bridge across the Narrows;
I call it “Splendid.” And the phalanx
of Manhattan’s warrior skyscrapers,
I call them “Towering.”

He often uses the possessive "my," like this trick of naming, to mean not that he possesses something, or wants to, but that he has given himself to it; "my only one, my world" is a recurrent locution for what he cannot help but love. In "The Lordly Hudson," the river itself is literal—its beauty stressed by the poet's verbal repetition—and it has become "our" Hudson; the "my" has gone up a notch. This could be reality. The fantasy is that someone else agrees and cares; and beyond the fantasy remains the exile's lonely joy:

"Driver, what stream is it?" I asked, well knowing
it was our lordly Hudson hardly flowing,
"It is our lordly Hudson hardly flowing,"
he said, "under the green-grown cliffs."

Be still, heart! no one needs your passionate
suffrage to select this glory,
this is our lordly Hudson hardly flowing
under the green-grown cliffs.

"Driver! has this a peer in Europe or the East?"
"No no!" he said. Home! Home!
be quiet, heart! this is our lordly Hudson
and has no peer in Europe or the East,

this is our lordly Hudson hardly flowing
under the green-grown cliffs
and has no peer in Europe or the East.
Be quiet, heart! home! home!

As a stylist, Goodman has the defects of his virtues. I am personally unhappy that he lacks the most central gift in poetry next to a good ear, a metaphoric imagination. His metaphors are few, and commonly banal. I suspect this correlates with his mistrust of the luxurious and wasteful, that he inclined to think of metaphor as a merely decorative device, something to sugar the spoon. In "Little Prayers and Finite Experience" he observes that his bias is toward the literal. He can't, as he says, even change the names of his lovers when he writes about them. The use of "symbols" strikes him as sophomoric. Perhaps the reason is that he sees the world as ethics, not metaphysics, so that the flat line of talk he lays down in verses directs itself always forward, not laterally or globally, toward the discovery of correspondences and syntheses. That diminishes the world, and sacrifices depth, as his plain style forfeits resonance. "Say my poems," he says; and we can say them, but not sing them.

On the other hand, the virtues. If American critics valued formal

originality, or even if they valued (as they all claim to do) organic form, Goodman would have been recognized as a major poet long ago. The sense of plain materials fills the texture of his verse, as the admiration for them filled his thought. The poems read like a scissorcut at the edge of yardgoods and the clean ripping all across the cloth; or a man chopping wood. The language has the vigor of many nouns and verbs, few adjectives and adverbs—hence substance and deed unrefined, unqualified, unsubtle. A quirky rough prosody for the speech rhythms of the (usually) long sentences to fit into, enjambed and breaking in midline more likely than not, something like dangling shoelaces. A colloquial diction, which, however, can shift back and forth to the learned or archaic phrase, not for pomp or points, but because that is how a lifelong scholar who spends time in New York City streets has to think. “Motion of mind in English syntax” straight-out declarative, or angled into inversion and ellipse which make the comparable syntactic features of Berryman look like artful hollow stage props. Goodman was proud of his style for what he could make it say, and apart from having his lines scan and rhyme when he wanted them to, he may not have thought much about it. It fits perfectly, like well-worn clothes, his quick-witted and defenceless self.

According to one *New Yorker* review, Goodman was “too pragmatic a writer to be a good poet.” What the typical critical dismissal of Goodman boils down to, I think, is the sense that he has tried to write a poetry without decorum. And this is a central matter, because decorum is to poetry as manners is to society.

Manners, as we know, exist to maintain a given social structure, to initiate the young into it, and to ensure that those who cannot perform correctly shall be excluded socially. Manners make life agreeable and keep people smiling. And manners protect us all—from each other and from the forbidden—functioning as a film or mask between the raw self and the rest of the world, or between the raw and, as it were, the cooked self. What do good manners forbid? The exhibition of strong emotion—sexuality, anger, fear, joy, grief. Don’t break down and cry. Don’t be seized by the inner light and start to pray at the dinner table. Do not show crude appetite, eating like a pig, although the rules vary on drunkenness. For intellectuals: if you wish to be asked back, avoid expressing thoughts unusual to the company—unless you can do so charmingly and wittily—in which case your audience will not be offended and will understand, as Wilde’s and Shaw’s did, that you do not mean to be taken seriously. If properly internalized and believed in, manners will protect you and me from inner disruption as well: our beastly selves, our potential insanity, our terrors.

In poetry, what pleases and protects us is decorum. Although we suppose that a great part of poetry's function is, precisely, finding ways to express the private self, the forbidden, the impolite, it seldom does so. Instead, it develops relatively safe adjustments. It gives us "personae" and "the speaker," Yeats's masks, Henry instead of John Berryman. Poets need "control," just as children do. Poets need distance. Readers need the distinction between Art and Life. If we doubt the power of the unwritten rules for literary politeness, we may consider those subcodes of remarkable persistence, by which poetry touches, yet does not touch, emotions and perceptions that make people uncomfortable in life. To write of love and sex, for example, we have a pattern set by Petrarch whereby we distinguish between "high" love and "low" sex, so that a high and serious style cannot be used for gross sex, and so that the correct stance of the poet-lover is suffering. Keats violated the code in "The Grecian Urn"—"Most happy love! Most happy love!"—and critics have been shuddering with embarrassment for him ever since. He spilled the soup.

For anger we have satire. For genuinely subversive ideas of any sort we have comedy to disarm by laughter and to imply that we do not mean these ideas literally. For disappointed idealism, which may be the strongest single "emotion" in twentieth-century poetry, we have the sour grape of irony. Even so-called "confessional" poets stay well within the bounds of propriety; they cannot offend us by excessive intimacy, for they are alienated from themselves.

Goodman bawls, boasts, gets excited about Immanuel Kant, exhibits his penis, and kvetches endlessly. All his ideas are subversive, and he means everything literally. He has no shame. Depressed, he reminds himself of when

Goethe burst in tears and Beethoven
leapt from the piano where he was improvising
and shook him and cried out, 'Admit! admit!
admit! admit! admit that it means something!'

Absurdly unpretentious, he mumbles, then shrugs:

What is the Buddha? "Drat!
pass the salt," the sage spat.
I understand. I understand
but I am not enlightened.

Am I enlightened? How would I know?

For some people, all this will be as refreshing as daylight. For most readers and critics of American poetry it will not even be poetry, and this is reasonable. Writers of indecorum preach to the converted, maybe giving blood transfusions to shrivelled convictions; they should not expect a broad audience. I remember a woman once saying to me, apologetically, “I *love* Paul Goodman’s poetry, but I know it’s for the wrong reasons.” I think it is a bit deplorable that we should apologize for what we love, yet that about wraps it up: anyone who cares for Goodman’s poetry will do so “for the wrong reasons.”

BOOKS

FACT AND . . .

A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS. By Peter Handke. Translated by Ralph Manheim, Farrer, Straus & Giroux. \$5.95.

In the village of A. (G. township), a housewife, aged 51, committed suicide on Friday night by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

The ambivalent character of this newspaper report, which appears in the first paragraph of Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, becomes apparent if slightly changed:

A 51 year old housewife committed suicide, etc.

Now it seems to intend, beyond information, a meaning. However—

village—housewife—51—Friday night

—shrinks into syntactic structure, away from meaning, because “aged 51,” inserted after “housewife,” interrupts, as if some boor had asked a question:

“In the village of A. (G. township), a housewife . . .”
“How old was she?”

But upon reading the whole report, as it stands, anybody could ask: Does it happen often? Mainly on Friday night? Mainly among housewives? My point is that every report, in the deluge of news, is infinitely suggestive and utterly gratuitous. None is a story. Whatever data they carry, they speak only of emptiness. For example, the much reported assassination of President Kennedy, with its persistent detectival necrophilia, has become merely

another "boring" Antonioni movie. Perhaps it is good, then, to remember what America's leading ontologist, Walter Cronkite, says everytime he completes a TV newscast: "that's the way it is." He can apply this apprehension to revolutions, crime in high places, or the birth of a Jewish elephant. Is it impertinent to suggest that Cronkite is the unacknowledged genius of our literary avant-garde? After all, his apprehension is crucial to the best contemporary writing. It appears in Handke's work even before the housewife's suicide. She happens, by the way, to be his mother, and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, largely her biography, is an extremely moving, immensely sad, reportorial performance.

If it turned out to be fiction, if Handke's mother did not in fact commit suicide, it would be contemptible. On the other hand, since the newspaper says she did commit suicide, it is contemptible exactly to the degree that it is fiction. All this occurs to Handke. He says that the powerful facts must not overwhelm him, must not merely become a story. In this passage his scruples are subtle:

. . . I affect the usual biographical pattern and write: "At that time . . . later," "Because . . . although," "was . . . became . . . became nothing," hoping in this way to dominate the horror. That, perhaps, is the comical part of my story.

To dominate the horror—which is Handke's theme—requires self-conscious artificiality, or the rhetoric of no rhetoric, in which a story becomes a "story." Handke even stops the narrative momentum (like the "51" in the newspaper report), and, whenever relevant, gives historical information about Austrian life before, during, and after the war, generalizations about small town behavior, aesthetic speculations, and exceedingly particular descriptions of his mood since the suicide. In this manner, an extraordinary distance is created between himself and his mother; virtually as if Handke were competing with the newspaper. Specifically, he claims to be writing the book because he is better equipped to do so than an outside investigator (who might, for example, be a student of sociology), but it almost seems that his personal relation to his mother left him insufficient reason to write the book any other way. Indeed, a first born son might find reasons for not writing this book at all. However, as Handke explains above, his intention is to dominate the horror—in itself a strange, or estranging, word—and, at the same time, never to slide into that ancient habit of mind, that neurological cliché—a story. He says:

. . . isn't all information, even of things that have really happened, more or less a fiction? *Less*, if we content ourselves with a mere record of events; *more*, if we try to formulate in depth?

It is, then, precisely between *less* and *more* that Handke writes, and he is always quick to notice and to despise any necessary submission to formulaic elements—literary conventions, personal tones, the grammatical parts of speech—and even his explicit, rational justifications of his procedure strike him as “arbitrary.” He thinks, whatever he thinks, he might well have thought something else. In other words, procedure is posture. This, too, is an odd reflection for the recently bereaved, but Handke makes it coincident with his theme in the final paragraph:

Horror is something perfectly natural: the mind’s horror vacui. A thought is taking shape, then suddenly it notices that there is nothing more to think. Whereupon it crashes to the ground like a figure in a comic strip who suddenly realizes that he has been walking on air.

True, comedy lives in the *imago veritatis*, but it is tempting to ask: Did Handke’s mother commit suicide or did he think it? Is the horror in her suicide or is it in the nature of thinking? Is the former what T.S. Eliot would call the “objective correlative” of the latter? To pursue connections and discriminations implicit in these questions is nauseating preciousness, characteristic of bourgeois intellectuals, and, therefore, Handke’s notes of self-qualifying irony are always apt, giving a sort of wretched piquancy to his controlled vacillations in tonal narcissism. This is the last line:

Someday I shall write about all this in greater detail.

All what? Even if I grant that Handke is determined *to think*, I must wonder if somebody hasn’t told him the news. Literally, the news. Shortly before this book was written, his mother, the village housewife, blew herself away on downers. But early in the book, Handke says:

The worst thing right now would be sympathy, expressed in a word or even a glance. I would turn away or cut the sympathizer short, because I need the feeling that what I am going through is incomprehensible and incommunicable; only then does the horror seem meaningful and real.

The implications of this remark make sympathy irrelevant, but they leave a place for pity. Handke knows what he feels; he also knows what he needs to feel; beyond all that, he knows what you might mistakenly feel about the way he intends to review—not simply his mother’s life—but his needs and feelings. Advertising all that knowledge makes this a very self-consciously impersonal book. To repeat: it is extremely moving, immensely sad. I will

mention the specifically affective contents, but I want to pay my respects first to the artist. I return then to Handke in the same spirit, I hope, in which he returns so remorselessly to himself. Whatever its genre may be, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is not the following:

(1) A story that betrays the sheer chronological facticity of his mother's life by giving it, in dramatic organization, a speciously organic character, a traditional shape of art wrought with intimations of meaning. It is a "story," not a story. It is also not an essay.

(2) A story that carries the stench of a commodity.

(3) A story that displays a grossly self-indulgent need to beautify peculiar, personal feelings stimulated by the suicide of his mother. (Handke is never guilty of being like a poet who, according to Nietzsche, exploits his own experience. Such exploitation, commercial or not, is a deplorable act, comparable to masturbating in public; but it would be especially deplorable if Handke also exploited the experience of his mother, which led not to lyric consummation but to self-annihilation.)

(4) A story that incurs the shameful risk to which every writer is subject—*seeming* to want emotional effects in his readers, and, in this seeming, to desecrate their interiority, the writer's own interiority, and the language that binds all to all. (Handke thinks language binds all to all in lies, and he substantiates this idea by using clichéd language to describe humanized objects or formalized relations which, in a naive traditional view, might require honorifics; for example, Handke's use of clichéd description for man and wife behavior suggests that marriage is a species of hypocrisy, along with its attendant things, like ironing boards and pots.)

(5) A story qualified by the ultimate abomination, wherein the inexpressible is made to seem expressed. (The book's last line, quoted above, answers to this.) However, the abomination must be built into language itself. If language is a lie, it follows that this idea is also a lie, since only language can make it manifest. But, in any event, the abomination is so complex and subtle that nothing but a "story" can represent it. Handke, who is aware of all these considerations, has written such a "story" in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, which is not a story. (Shakespeare, Cervantes, Diderot, Hegel, and others touch on all the problems I've listed. Even the desire to make things new isn't new, except for the way it's made.) Handke says:

Often while at work on my story I felt that writing music would be more in keeping with its incidents. Sweet New England . . .

Briefly, then, the ultimate abomination comes to this: If the extraordinary state of feeling from which a story emerges would be true to itself, it would be silent. Only a stone is authentic, let alone sincere. So let's sing Sweet New England. When Handke is inclined to sneer, he doesn't overlook himself.

Here now, as relief from universally corrosive valuations, and from reasons for not telling a story so tellingly, and, as an example of classic silence which involves similar aesthetic-moral considerations, is an epitaph for a dead child:

Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lye
Ben: Jonson his best piece of *poetrie*.

Self-conscious wit sublimates into natural, poignant surface. Jonson renders a personal statement; in the whole poem, his cultural era—manners, values, relation to the nature of things—is beautifully implicit. But we don't talk like that anymore. Handke's literary achievement, in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, includes more and less than Jonson's poem. The cultural era is symbolized by the newspaper report. A key to personal statement—everywhere explicit in impersonal repetitions—is first announced by an epigraph from Bob Dylan:

He not busy being born is busy dying.

Graceless and a little stupid, but incontestably appropriate. In writing this book, says Handke with Dylan, he will be busy, lest he die with his mother. The second paragraph, which makes a slightly shocking contrast to the first, begins:

My mother has been dead for almost seven weeks; I had better get to work before the need to write about her, which I felt so strongly at her funeral, dies away and I fall back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the news of her suicide.

Handke obviously isn't the classic Jonson who, in magnificent verse, mourns. In this contemporary, too human world, Handke's mother killed herself—perhaps you read about it in the newspaper?—and the thing about suicide is that it kills more than its immediate victim. It can even seem viciously indiscriminate, because whomever else it may concern is seized abruptly and permanently, and forced to confront the horror, the ineluctable horror otherwise delivered to us flatly, regularly, copiously, and bear-

ably in our newspaper. In suicide, the way it is, actually is the way it is. This becomes especially evident in the "case" of Handke's mother. Denied the gratifications of her superlative individuality, by traditional crushing attitudes toward women, she became increasingly a type, an example of the everybody whose voice is newspaper prose. Suicide was the logical-psychological nothing of her woman's fate.

From his deathbed, Rabbi Schneur Zalman reported: "I see as yet only the Divine Nothing that gives life to the universe." In radical agreement, Meister Eckhart sings: "God is the denial of denials." But Handke is in no mood to affirm the something of nothing, unless to write anything at all is to make this affirmation—even if he would exhibit only and precisely the ubiquitous, numinous, mysterious nil—the horror, his theme, the nothing of something. For his self-consciously ironical modernist conscience, and perhaps for reasons never directly given in the book, his "story" must include old fashioned aesthetic attitudinizing and even moments of frivolity that are, if not necessary, not exactly unjustified. Despite this objective, impersonalized treatment, the horror grows and intensifies. Like a story, it gathers tremendous power, a literary effect that represents, perhaps even *resembles* in the traditional way, the gathering, excruciating vacancy which became his mother's life, and which was neither a story nor a "story." As Handke assures us, his mother's life was not atypical enough to be anything at all. "I would like to present this VOLUNTARY DEATH as an exemplary case." In this sentence, lest we fail to see it, irony is hammered into capitals. His mother's life was, in short, a vehicle of sociological *significance*, a kind of psycho-social-historical-accumulation-toward-suicide. In German, certainly, there is a word for it, for the way *it* is, that sorrow beyond the dreams of art, beyond even the slithery distortions of language.

A Sorrow Beyond Dreams contains lines that are worth whole bloated novels wheezing truth and deep feeling. Amid the misery of his final reflections, Handke says, "I felt mocked and helpless. All at once, in my impotent rage, I felt the need of writing something about my mother," and shortly thereafter he says, "When she was angry, she didn't beat the children; at most, she would wipe their noses violently." Is it insufferable, especially following my own self-righteous strictures, to say that a literary work has made one weep? I'll put it this way: in the dazzling tensivity between Handke's treatment of himself—bereaved son, philosophical writer, hip contemporary—and the stunning penetration given by the images of his mother, she lived exquisitely for me. I think I loved her. I know that I wept for her, not for the Cronkite apprehension, Handke's horror, or the reportorial art of this fascinating book.

LEONARD MICHAELS

... FICTION

SHORT LETTER, LONG FAREWELL, By Peter Handke. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$7.95.

The only thing that preoccupies me as a writer is nausea at stupid speechification and the resulting brutalization of people.

Handke in an interview

The most important dramatist to have emerged since Beckett, Peter Handke responds impertinently to the perennially predicted death of the theater. Most of the interesting stage works of our time undermine one of the major assumptions of Western theater since the Greeks, the primacy of the literary text; but not Handke's. In a period dominated by directorial *auteurs* (Grotowski, Robert Wilson, Judith and Julian Beck, Meredith Monk, et al.), whose best works are essentially non-verbal, Handke, a thirty-two year old Austrian, not only continues to write plays, but plays which are literally *nothing but* language and/or are *about* language. *Offending the Audience* and *Self-Accusation* consist of "speakers" reading to the audience from Handke's text and eliminate characters, stories, scenery, and costumes. *Kaspar* concerns the terroristic coercion of language. And the severely attenuated "action" of *The Ride Across Lake Constance* turns on the problematic nature of speaking.

Handke has also published four novels: *Die Hornissen* (1966) and *Der Hausierer* (1967) have not yet been translated; *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* was brought out here three years ago; *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, last fall. Although these lack the formal inventiveness, the vivacity, and the masterly control of Handke's best plays, they are scarcely second-rate and, like the plays, have received only a fraction of the attention they deserve in this country.

The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick, a tragedy in the guise of a crime novel, chronicles an ex-soccer player's futile efforts to formulate a language adequate to the physical, social, and psychological pressures that bombard him. The murderous hero's flaw is that the language of sport is the only one he knows. The book studies moral deadness, "feeling in deep freeze," to borrow a phrase from Annette Michelson. The new novel also takes its narrative frame (as well as its title) from the Raymond Chandler school of fiction: as the book's hero travels across the United States his ex-wife, a mysterious femme fatale, pursues him with intent to kill. But *Short*

Letter, Long Farewell is a comedy, and its inner drama concerns a man's painful but successful attempt to thaw himself out. It is about the rebirth of language, the creation of consciousness.

Like most of Handke's writing, *Short Letter, Long Farewell* is meta-art, art concerned with its own methods and with those of previous art, and it echoes, and bristles with references to, many literary sources besides Raymond Chandler. "I had been enjoying all of the poses of alienation available to me," the book's narrator remarks ironically, and these poses include: encountering a terrifying, Dostoevskian double at moments of crisis; suffering, very much like Sartre's Antoine Roquetin, from intellectual nausea; being haunted by the threatening opacity of objects in the manner of Robbe-Grillet's characters. The fact that these poses have been acted out many times before, both in life and in art, does not diminish their force here. On the contrary. That the protagonist's suffering has an historical as well as a subjective dimension, that the suffering may even be a case of his life imitating art, increases its pathos, makes it even more excruciating.

Because he cannot find a proper language to deal with the split between his subjectivity and the world, this nameless hero's prose consists mostly of naming. In the book's opening passages he simply names the objects which cross his sensory field and records his own movements in and out of hotel rooms and through city streets. When he encounters people he notes this, as though putting an item on a list, then turns away, "disgusted as usual with everything that [is] not myself." The flat, repetitive narrative style barely masks his inarticulate terror:

I compulsively described all the partial actions of which the total action was composed. . . . I tried to deceive my own sense of ignorance and inexperience by dissecting the few activities within my reach as though speaking of monumental undertakings.

The dilemma of Handke's protagonist (an Austrian writer) is very familiar, by now almost classical. How can he create a self when the only tool available for the task, language, disgusts him? For Handke, language means a series of interlocking but often conflicting signs, including those of movies, rock music, advertising, etc., as well as written and verbal expressions. Radically divergent claims on his attention swarm through the narrator's head like bees: Tarzan and Thomas Jefferson, Schiller and "Canned Heat," a Claes Oldenburg-like "catchup bottle as big as a lighthouse" and cryptic letters from his wife.

The man reacts to this ghastly, overloaded cultural situation with a

distrust of all languages, all claims to truth. Written language, particularly literary and philosophical, is historically devalued, encrusted with too many associations and predetermined “meanings.” Speech functions not as genuine social interchange, but has become nervous, egotistical babbling, which brutalizes the mind and the senses. The prisms of pop culture and of mass communication reflect a banal, miragelike, deforming reality. To find its proper home here the self must triumph over this ceaseless flow of information, which encourages the mind to turn outward in a feckless voyeurism:

Whatever I saw in print aroused a compulsive sympathy in me; I felt drawn to every person and place mentioned. . . .

and destroys experience:

It had already become inconceivable to me on the plane that I could be curious about anything in Tucson. I'd seen pictures of everything the place could possibly offer.

Global village indeed!

The narrator leaves the cities of the East and goes to St. Louis, “gateway of the West.” A fan of John Ford’s movies, he compares his inner quest with the settlement of a new land by Ford’s heroes; he “pioneers reality.” Slowly, he begins to make connections between his inner and outer worlds, *to pay attention*:

I think I’m developing something that looks like an active memory. Up until now I had only a passive memory.

He learns when to assign meaning to the world, when to leave it alone. Moving out of his paralyzing solipsism, he lives, sensitively and intelligently, with an American academic woman and her young daughter. He reads aloud from *Der grüne Heinrich* and measures himself against Gottfried Keller’s romantic hero. A great sifting and winnowing takes place, as the protagonist gleans what is useful *for him* from the available languages. The novel’s prose becomes richer; at times Handke allows himself a rare lyricism. Briefly, the hero relapses into passivity and the anaesthetized narration; the shaping of consciousness involves a continual beginning again. The line from Bob Dylan that Handke uses as the epigraph for another book could serve as well here: “He not busy being born is busy dying.”

In using elements of, and commenting on various literary languages (the existentialist canon, the American crime novel, the *Bildungsroman*, etc.), Handke implicitly asks: in what sense can one incorporate past conventions. His answer: only in fragments, lavishly decked with irony; judge past works fiercely, but take from them what wisdom is to be had. Handke's matter-of-fact, bare-boned prose prevents him from weaving all of his sources together into an intricate tapestry (as does, for example, Nabokov). Handke simply places heterogeneous elements side by side: acute observations about childhood and improbable happenings (like those involving acid in faucets, hired thugs, and letter bombs); terroristic dream sequences and essaylike passages on the movies and marriage; richly drawn characters (the academic woman) and ciphers (the wife); realistically observed details and extreme dramatic stylization; excruciating seriousness and flippant comic touches. The results, as might be expected, are very uneven. While many of the book's passages are beautifully sustained, others (like the final confrontation between the narrator and his wife), while they follow thematically, are dramatically awkward and peculiarly unfelt. Some of the motifs, like the ones from John Ford's movies, become obtrusive, even silly (particularly at the book's end, when Ford himself makes a guest star appearance). At times Handke seems to fall into the thrall of the pop iconography he debunks; instead of using it, he becomes its victim.

Deeply flawed, *Short Letter, Long Farewell* is nevertheless powerful and ambitious. Even as the book falters aesthetically, one admires its intellectual rigor and its complex meditations on language. Here as elsewhere Handke redefines the unexamined life as, precisely, the unexamined use of language. His hard-edged sensibility, sharply attuned to the contemporary scene, serves a rather old-fashioned and honorable activity: forging an ethics, presenting a model of conduct.

Short Letter, Long Farewell also contains the most interesting encounter between a European writer and the United States since Michel Butor's brilliant *Mobile*. Handke's accounts of America's daily rituals and its tableau-like vision of history are precise and witty and full of evocative metaphors. One example: There is a deep yellow light found only in America, a painter explains to the protagonist, which comes not from the sun or sky but from the ground itself. The color first entered art in nineteenth-century paintings by Catlin and Remington. Today one finds this indigenous yellow in the plastic arches of MacDonald's restaurants and the neon arrows of Holiday Inns.

STEVEN SIMMONS

THE WAY TO PARADISE

ALDOUS HUXLEY: A BIOGRAPHY. By Sybille Bedford. Alfred A. Knopf/Harper & Row, \$15.00.

"I remain sadly aware that I am not a born novelist, but some other kind of man of letters, possessing enough ingenuity to be able to simulate a novelist's behavior not too unconvincingly. To put the matter physiologically, I am the wrong shape for a story teller." Aldous Huxley made this admission in 1945 after completing one of his weakest novels, *Time Must Have a Stop*; by calling himself "the wrong shape" he meant that in the Sheldonian classification of body types he was an extreme ectomorph, all skin and nerves, and thus ill equipped to gobble up and assimilate the raw facts of life. Roly-poly endomorphs like Balzac or Dumas were the right shape for that. Whatever the plausibility of Huxley's self-diagnosis, its tone is entirely typical: rueful, resigned, and amused by the paradox that his lopsided intellectuality should be the product of a freakish physical constitution. Writers are notoriously inclined to hypochondria, but even in such company Huxley's consciousness seems more than normally conditioned by his bodily peculiarities and ailments. His career has something in common with that of his fellow valetudinarian Alexander Pope (the Mr. Short and Mr. Tall of English satirists): he began as a brilliant caricaturist of a social set that he was in, but not of; later, exiled from his original milieu into the social limbo of Los Angeles, he lost his sharp awareness of idiosyncrasy and could write only of man rather than of men.

By the time Huxley was twenty he had been irretrievably "impaired," as one of his friends put it. There were three wounds. First, when he was fourteen, the death of his mother, a charming and energetic woman who seems to have possessed a radiance like that of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Aldous took the loss hard, and found no replacement for his mother's love; he spent school holidays with various relatives rather than with his father, whom he considered weak and "silly." His earlier novels continue this balance, contrasting forceful mothers with aimless or ineffectual fathers. Later he creates a series of ideally strong and wise older men—the first is Dr. Miller of *Eyeless in Gaza*—who rescue younger men from drift or despair. To sum up the effect of his mother's early death Sybille Bedford aptly quotes Huxley's description, in *Grey Eminence*, of a bereaved child's sorrow: "There remained with him, latent at ordinary times but always ready to come to the surface, a haunting sense of the vanity, the transience,

the hopeless precariousness of all merely human happiness." If mature life implies a willingness to face up to emotional conflicts even if one knows them to be unresolvable, then Huxley shrank from maturity; his nerve for such struggles had been broken at the first encounter.

Two years later came the chance infection that condemned him to go through life a visual cripple. "*Keratitis punctata* shaped and shapes me," he wrote later. But his feeble sight did not hamper him in quite the way one would expect. All his life he read and wrote at prodigious length—including some excellent art criticism, though he could only take in paintings by scanning them with a magnifying glass, inch by inch. The real handicap lay in the stunting of his other capacities, since all his resources had to be committed to the labor of acquiring and expressing his enormous knowledge: he was like a man determined to fill a swimming pool with a teaspoon. In one year (1919), for example, he produced thirty-seven articles, nearly two hundred reviews, and other writings. He published altogether fifty-seven books. One can imagine the effort this required of someone who had to bring his watch within two inches of his better eye to tell the time. Huxley himself was quite conscious of the choice he had made: "When one hasn't much vitality or physical energy, it is almost impossible to live and work at the same time." The question remains, however, as to why his idea of a year's work vastly exceeded what most writers would undertake.

A third blow came when Aldous was twenty: the nervous breakdown and suicide of Trevenen, one of his two older brothers. Trev was more emotionally accessible than the rest of the cerebral Huxley clan, and more lovable; in *Eyeless in Gaza* Aldous re-created Trev as Brian Foxe, a lay saint who is tormented by a stutter and by excessive scrupulosity in his personal relations. Aldous worked out his own predicament in the same novel under the character of Anthony Beavis, who relates how he defended against the shock of Brian's suicide by becoming a "nonentity," an inhuman thinking machine: "I've . . . a queer feeling that I'm really not there, that I haven't been there for years past."

Politely turning aside all offers of sympathy, Huxley came to terms in solitude with his triple impairment, then shaped his literary career accordingly. He was determined to make an adequate living from writing, and had no strong identification with the concerns of the avant-garde; hence the hybrid quality of his deliberately Peacockian novels of the twenties. They combined conventionality of form with witty destructiveness; they stung, but without drawing blood from any but the most diehard defenders of the old proprieties; they were "advanced," but also accessible and entertaining. The political balance in Europe was still relatively stable, allowing Huxley to remain as much a humorist as a satirist; and his marriage to Maria Nys in

1919 helped preserve his personal equilibrium.

The Huxleys' marriage was in almost every respect opposite to that of D.H. Lawrence and Frieda—who nonetheless became their intimate friends. Both husbands were in precarious health; Maria's response was to assume the role of a devoted, self-effacing custodian of Aldous's comfort, whereas Frieda was so indifferent to Lawrence's physical needs that she was widely accused of hastening his death. Lawrence, notoriously, conceived of sexual relationships as open and continuous struggles between the participants; but Maria so much revered Aldous's intellect, and considered his gifts so far above her own, that she felt it her duty to shield him from all outside claims that might threaten his solitary cerebration. Not only would she serve his needs at the expense of her own, and ward off every mundane annoyance, she would do it so discreetly that he would not even realize the extent of her services. Telling a young niece how to please a husband, Maria advised her to work on his behalf "incessantly, invisibly, and without his knowledge," in order that he "won't have to tire himself by thanking you." Maria even took on the management of Aldous's love affairs, from the selection of likely candidates through to their early, though courteous, dismissal. This ultimate token of devotion Sybille Bedford explains as a facet of Maria's "aristocratic view of sex"; but she leaves us in doubt as to whether Aldous conceded to Maria an equivalent sexual liberty.

Perhaps most marriages would appear similarly distorted if exposed to the cold light of outside scrutiny; nonetheless, Maria's extreme subservience seems a tainted gift, one that mired Aldous ever deeper in his "besetting sin, the dread and avoidance of emotion, the escape from personal responsibility." Her ability to infuse warmth into relations with their mutual friends, while admirable in itself, relieved Aldous of the need to make his own contribution. The course of her final illness sounds as grotesque, in its own way, as anything in his novels. She was privately obsessed with having to outlive Aldous, since "How would he manage without me? . . . I should have failed in my duty to him"; while he apparently did not even realize she had cancer until a week before her death, though it had been diagnosed more than three years previously. After she died, his tribute to her admitted his own delinquency: "in so far as I have learned to be human—and I had a great capacity for not being human—it is thanks to her."

"Extraordinary" indeed, to use one of Aldous's favorite words; yet despite this evidence there is truth also in Bedford's passing remark that he was "the least neurotic of men." He seems to have been quite content with the terms of his second marriage to Laura Archera—who had a profession of her own, often lived apart from him, and made it clear from the beginning that she would not devote herself to him as Maria had. The only difficult re-

relationships of his adult life were with his young son—he knew he was an inadequate father, and tried to make amends when Matthew was older—and with the flamboyant Nancy Cunard, for whom he felt a brief but agonized love in the early nineteen-twenties. Nancy's passionately idealistic and self-consuming career stood as an implicit reproach to Huxley's Olympian detachment, which only this one sexual infatuation could breach. The woman who had so thoroughly humiliated him he commemorated, not without malice, as Myra Viveash in *Antic Hay* and Lucy Tantamount in *Point Counter Point*.

Against individual passions Huxley's standard defenses were withdrawal, rationalization, and irony. The mass passions of our century he tried at first to ward off with similar attitudes; but, as a person of intellectual integrity, he eventually had to admit that his responses were inadequate in the face of a radical and destructive transformation of the whole culture that had shaped his youth. For all their surface acerbity, his earlier satires had neither expressed any deep revulsion against the status quo, nor proposed any way of amending it. But from 1933 onwards, as the political situation deteriorated, Huxley underwent a personal crisis that culminated at the end of 1935 in his declaration of allegiance to the Peace Pledge Union of the Reverend Dick Sheppard. This was surprising enough for the audience that had taken him for the epitome of youthful irreverence; but even more shocking was the ground on which he based his pacifism. He would not go quite so far as to acknowledge the personal God of Christianity; but he did argue that the way to world peace was the general recognition of an extrahuman "spiritual reality . . . God . . . regarded, and if possible experienced as a psychological fact, present at least potentially in every human being."

Huxley's newfound mysticism remained with him to the end of his life, though for all his skill as a popularizer he had little success in converting his readers to this particular belief. But it is important to remember that his commitment to a higher spiritual reality grew out of the bitter political dilemmas of the thirties, and that it would be unfair to accuse him of making a pusillanimous retreat into otherworldliness. Rather the contrary occurred: in unison with his mysticism he developed an equivalent commitment to social action, of a kind that for many years was dismissed as irrelevant or quixotic but now has been generally admitted as a central concern of politics. The issues of population control, ecology, chemical alteration of consciousness, psychological and sexual liberation, were all explored by Huxley long before they became fashionable; though his contempt for traditional politics left him at a loss to suggest credible means of implementing the sweeping changes he advocated.

After his conversion Huxley was no longer a good novelist by the usual

literary standards; though, if he in part admitted his decline, he felt no guilt. He had never been a devotee of literary art for its own sake, and now he came to believe that the Western literary tradition was incompatible with the basic values of a good society, since, as he wrote in *Island*, it promoted only "dualism, criminal lunacy, impossible aspiration, and unnecessary guilt." He thus turned his back on the Faustian cult of the self that has been at the center of modern bourgeois ideology; and he applied his cultural prescription to his personal life by consciously distancing himself from the sorrows and ambitions of his youth. This makes him a rather unrewarding subject for a biography, since he seems progressively to disappear into a system of pet ideas, or into a persona of disembodied benevolence. Sybille Bedford seems indeed to have adopted from Huxley himself the calm, amiable, and detached tone of her study. Potentially destructive episodes are told candidly enough, but they are not presented as if they really mattered *to her*, nor are they used to build up any critical analysis of Huxley's personality and career. Bedford's tolerance is most strained by his enthusiasm for mescaline and LSD, but it does not snap. The biography, then, is a tribute to Huxley the man and a chronicle of his achievements rather than a critical interpretation. As a tribute it is graceful, comprehensive, and honest about its subject's flaws if not disturbed by them.

Perhaps this is ultimately a fair response to Huxley. Apart from the extraordinarily sweet and serene personality he achieved in later life—which anyone who met him, even briefly as I did, could hardly fail to be impressed by—he was after all one of the most enlightened and sensible of modern writers, one who never dabbled in the toxic kinds of unreason that seduced so many of his peers. Whatever the sins of omission in his private life, it was not finally by that life that he would wish to be judged but by the message of his works; which he once wryly summed up as no more, and no less, than "try to be a little more kind."

PAUL DELANY

RED, WHITE, AND BLUE

THE WORKING CLASS MAJORITY. By Andrew Levison. Coward, McCann, Geoghegan. \$8.95.

BLUE COLLAR COMMUNITY. By William Kornblum. University of Chicago Press. \$9.95.

Overt class conflict is rare in America, and one of its substitutes is attitudinal strife, which is expressed through the hostile stereotypes with which the various classes view each other. For example, many upper-middle-class people think of the working class as a homogeneous mass of uncultured hawks and racists; conversely, many working-class people see the upper middle class as snobs who do not know how to enjoy life, sit on their posteriors instead of doing "real" work, and use their expertise and status to harass working-class people.

What the upper middle class thinks of the other classes frequently becomes part of the public culture, since the content of that culture is largely, if not entirely, created by upper-middle-class people. Thus, while we know in fulsome detail what upper-middle-class critics think of popular culture, what the patrons of popular culture think of the critics rarely becomes public, since they do not write books and articles. Occasionally, an Archie Bunker will express the anger that many working-class people feel toward the more fortunate classes, but most of the time, this anger is only expressed privately, since it is not considered suitable for the polite discourse of the mass media.

Nevertheless, in some ways, the working class is in a more fortunate position in the attitudinal class struggle than the other classes, because ever since Marx assigned the working class an important role in the revolution, there have also been critics and writers, not necessarily Marxists, who have defended the working class against its detractors. The two books under review here are excellent, and non-Marxist, restatements of this defense, both written by authors who have lived several years with the people about whom they write.

Levison's *The Working Class Majority*, written for the general reader, is a combination of social science and poll data and the author's own observations, which sets out explicitly to correct the erroneous upper-middle-class image of the working class. Perhaps Levison's most important point

comes in the first chapter in which he demonstrates the inaccuracy of the conventional conception of America as a predominantly middle-class society. Reanalyzing census figures on occupation to show that the large and increasing number of service workers who are generally assumed to wear white collars are in fact mostly blue-collar workers. Levison estimates that 60 percent of American jobholders are and will continue to be working class, and that America, like most other modern nations, is therefore still a predominantly working-class society. To be sure, occupational statistics do not tell the whole story, for culturally and otherwise, the upper middle and middle classes have much more power than the working class, but this only supports Levison's thesis that the working-class majority is relegated to second class citizenship.

The body of Levison's book provides specifics for this thesis. While the electricians and plumbers who repair the houses of writers about America get very high hourly wages, most blue-collar workers do not. In 1970, Levison points out, 30 percent of working-class families were earning under \$7,000 a year, and the median income of blue-collar workers as a whole was only about \$9,500, approximately \$500 below the median for all Americans. In addition, Levison shows that blue-collar workers still suffer from job insecurity, poor and unsafe working conditions, a regressive tax system, housing policies that discriminate against them, inferior schools, and many other barriers to equality of results and opportunity. The working class is, of course, better off than the poor, but it is still far from middle-class income levels of economic security and comfort, and its fortunes have declined further since the book was published.

Levison's survey of the condition of the working class is a prologue to his political argument. He wants to persuade his readers, who are presumably mostly upper-middle-class, that the public image of the blue-collar worker as a racist hardhat who supports conservative and often corrupt unions is also wrong and that any attempt to exclude workers and their political representatives from a voice in the Democratic party on these grounds is unjustified. Levison marshalls considerable poll data to indicate that workers are generally more liberal, and more dovish, than commonly thought—and often more so than middle-class poll respondents. He also offers a balanced appraisal of the unions, which does not flinch from admitting that undue conservatism and corruption exist, but which also points out that the unions have played an active role in pressing for progressive economic and racial legislation. This rarely noted union activity deserves the emphasis Levison gives it particularly because unions lobby in behalf of the poor and the black even though these two populations sometimes compete for the jobs and housing of many union members.

Levison's analysis is entirely sound, and his political argument, though not original, is persuasive. Unlike other critics of the left liberals in the Democratic party, for example Ben Wattenberg, who rail against what he calls the "Failure and Guilt Complex" and discern a "Massive Majority Middle Class" which should return control of the party to the Richard Daleys and Scoop Jacksons, Levison does not support the old party chieftains and argues for a party that represents the interests of working-class people as well as liberals.

Whether Levison's argument will be as effective as it is persuasive remains to be seen. He has a tendency to attack the very liberals he is trying to persuade, and in the process, to forget to attack the conservatives, who not only hold a similarly distorted view of the working class, but who, as corporate managers and politicians, are far more responsible than liberals for the present plight of the blue-collar worker. I also wonder whether the distortions which Levison criticizes can be corrected by his combination of data and moral argument. Actually, many liberals are economically and culturally upper-middle-class before they are liberals, and like others of their class, they have a condescending view of the less fortunate strata below them. Moreover, since they are affluent enough to be able to afford ideological blinders that cater to their cultural self-interest, and are not directly dependent on the workers for their own livelihood and status, they have no great incentive for changing their opinions. Perhaps the success of Levison's book, and its prepublication, in abridged form, in the *New Yorker*—an upper-middle-class magazine that rarely pays much attention to the working class—signify that upper-middle-class liberals are now ready to look more kindly at the working class. Still, the real test will come at the Democratic convention in July when these liberals have to decide whether they will get behind a Presidential candidate who speaks to the Democratic working class even if he does not satisfy all the ideological requirements of upper-middle-class liberalism.

Kornblum's book is very different from Levison's in many ways, but its final, albeit implicit, argument is much the same. *Blue Collar Community* is a scholarly sociological study of the steel mill neighborhoods of South Chicago, which demonstrates that old ethnic, racial, and neighborhood conflicts that have often divided the steel workers are being muted, and common economic and political interests are gradually manifesting themselves in union and ward politics to make the area into an effective community.

Kornblum wrote his book for his fellow sociologists, but it deserves attention from the general reader, for it details beautifully the complex texture of working-class life, and the subtle processes by which the South

Chicagoans, as steel workers and residents, restructure old institutions to overcome the allegiances which traditionally divided them. Kornblum's analysis of the role of ethnicity is particularly important, for he shows that the South Chicagoans are far more sensible than the ethnic intellectuals who have recently been agitating for a revival of ethnicity as a primordial, somewhat mystical, force to counteract both secular rationalism and left-liberal and radical appeals for political change. There was no ethnic revival in South Chicago, for the steel workers have a flexible attitude toward their ethnicity which has changed little in recent years; they use it to protect their families and homes from outside influences they consider undesirable, and as a mechanism for political organization around essentially working-class issues, in which they cooperate both with ethnics from other national backgrounds and blacks. What the larger society calls working-class racism is not absent from South Chicago, but Kornblum points out that while white steel workers try to keep blacks out of their residential neighborhoods mainly to protect their own status, they regularly support black candidates for leadership in their unions and their ward political organizations.

Although sociological texts have sometimes promulgated the same stereotypes about the working class against which Levison's book argues, Kornblum's study represents a long-standing sociological tradition, the use of empirical research to defend the working class against its critics. Kornblum eschews explicit advocacy, but in the end, he comes to much the same conclusion as Levison. By implication, he too pleads for the inclusion of working-class interests in the politics of the larger community, although he is more aware than Levison that the workers must struggle for that inclusion themselves and cannot wait for the development of greater tolerance among upper-middle-class liberals. In fact, *Blue Collar Community* ends with the struggle of a progressive young steel union leader, Edward Sadlowski, to defeat the old Germano machine—the equivalent in Chicago area union politics of the Daley machine. Sadlowski won his election, with the help of the courts, after Kornblum's book was completed, and is likely to support the kind of working-class—liberal coalition that both authors stand for.

HERBERT J. GANS

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WRITERS' CHOICE

GEORGE STADE: A book I wish that everyone would read and that intellectuals would argue with and about is Weston La Barre's *The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion*. It was widely reviewed when it first came out (in 1974), and for the most part favorably, but not always by the right people or in the right places. I see no sign in any case, that it has been assimilated by the general reader, let alone by social scientists or students of religion—or by anyone else trying to account for the various crisis cults, pre-revolutionary-messianic sects, and touts for the Apocalypse springing up all around us. This book, it seems to me, has become more important each year since it was published. It describes better than any other book I know the psychosocial conditions under which characters such as St. Paul, Thomas of Müntzer, Charles Manson, and hundreds of others around the world in rain forests and cities emerge from the obscurity of private pathology to find followers, begin movements, and sometimes shake the world. La Barre, by the way, does not condescend to his psychopaths, nor does he underestimate the pathologies of the established orders they pit themselves against: without the social pathologies the private ones remain private. *The Ghost Dance* supplies the psychological dimension that Weber, Durkheim, and

Norman Cohen leave out and that anthropological dimension that Erickson leaves out and that Freud could not have known. I have read it four times in the last four years, each time leaving it with my head on fire. It is also a book to dip into and reread in bits before turning off the bed lamp, as one might dip into, say, the *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

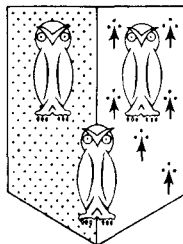
La Barre's predecessor, James Mooney, whose *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (available in a Dover paperback as La Barre's book is available in a Delta) was first published in 1896, is also worth reading and still enlightening about what is going on around us. Mooney, who was sympathetic to the Indians, compares the Ghost Dance religion to that of Ranters, Quakers, Shakers, Jumpers, Fifth-Monarchy Men, and the Like.

LEONARD KRIEGEL: Like its creator, *Studs Lonigan* has for so long been out of critical fashion that one suspects its time of rebirth may be upon us. In any case, to reread *Studs*, dated slang and all, is to understand what Norman Mailer means when he describes Farrell as "a perfect example of someone who started with a sense of identity." But Farrell's example goes deeper than that. Like Dreiser,

Farrell forces us to confront the old idea that writing is as much situation as it is technique and that to do it honestly one is simply going to have to fight for his own terrain. In *Studs*, Farrell did exactly that.

ALICIA OSTRIKER: Paul Goodman, *Collected Poems* (ed. Taylor Stohr, memoir by George Dennison, Random House, 1973). For those who, like myself, treasure Goodman the other side idolatry and believe that the verse is the essence of the man. The volume is loosely arranged by themes rather than chronologically, and this arrangement is largely that of Goodman himself, who was working on it at the time of his death. As a result, we find for example, a sonnet dated 1939 two pages after one dated 1970, and a piece from 1953 among the last few pages. The edition also retains Goodman's latest revisions, which, like Wordsworth's, are not necessarily felicitous. "The Lordly Hudson," as one instance, has been mutilated by his altering "Be still, heart . . . Be quiet, heart" to "Be still, man . . . be patient, Paul," which may gain colloquial immediacy, but loses rhetorical power. On the other hand the *aficionado* will be glad to find that there are many previously unpublished pieces, that the work is handsomely printed, and that the memoir by George Dennison is excellent.

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I NEVER WANTED TO BE VICE-PRESIDENT OF ANYTHING: An Investigative Biography of Nelson Rockefeller, by Michael Kramer and Sam Roberts. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$12.95

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INSTEAD OF EDUCATION: Ways to Help People Do Things Better, by John Holt. Dutton, \$8.95

Since we learn by doing, says Holt, we must find ways of turning out whole society into a genuine place for learning. As opposed to positive learning processes, education is a function of compulsory schooling, which Holt regards as among the most authoritarian of all the inventions of man—and one which actually prevents positive learning. Given this negative view of schools, though, Holt has some interesting and sympathetic advice for teachers, for people who want to be teachers, for parents, and for thoughtful people interested in the basic purposes of an educational system.

THREE JOURNEYS: An Autobiography, by Paul Zweig. Basic Books, \$8.95

The three journeys described in this illuminating autobiographical account of a young poet's life take us through a modern city, into the desert, and finally to the feet of a holy man. In his "Automythology," Zweig has given form to the process by which we all find those themes which link and give meaning to the otherwise disconnected events of our lives.

LENIN IN ZURICH, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, translated by H.T. Willets. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$8.95

Lenin in Zurich chronicles Lenin's frustrating exile in Switzerland, from his arrest in Cracow and subsequent flight to Zurich at the outbreak of World War I, to his departure for Russia in 1917. Solzhenitsyn examines the private man as well as the familiar public figure, concentrating on facets of Lenin's personality and behavior that have been glossed over in most other accounts. Solzhenitsyn has set himself the task of establishing the truth of Russia's early revolutionary years and of probing the character of the man who had such an indelible impact on his country's fate.

NOTES FOR THE TWO-DOLLAR WINDOW: Portraits from an American Neighborhood, by Leonard Kriegel. Saturday Review Press, \$8.95

An autobiographical memoir of a white working-class neighborhood in the Bronx from the thirties to the present, as seen through the lives of the Irish, the Italians, and the Jews living there. It is about change, about wanting and hurting and joking, and, always, about trying to get ahead: the luck of the two-dollar window at the race track; the chance to out-manuever the system. "In his new book Kriegel has emerged as 'the Fred Exley of the Bronx' and more." —DAN WAKEFIELD

STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY: VOLUME II, by Claude Levi-Strauss, translated by Monique Layton. Basic Books, \$17.50

In this long-awaited Volume II of his *Structural Anthropology* Levi-Strauss focuses on such important topics as: comparative religion as it relates to non-literate peoples; how myths die; structuralism and literary criticism; urban civilization and mental health; the founders of modern cultural study such as Rousseau and Durkheim; and his own reflections on kinship; the future of art; and race in history.

THE LIVES OF ROGER CASEMENT, by B.L. Reid. Yale University Press, \$25.00

A controversial figure to the end, Roger Casement was raised to the pantheon of martyred political heroes in Ireland, while in England Madame Tussaud featured him in her Chamber of Horrors. B.L. Reid narrates the events leading to Casement's participation in the Easter Rising of 1916, and his subsequent arrest, trial, and execution.

DAY OF THE LEOPARDS: Essays in Defense of Poetry, by W.K. Wimsatt. Yale University Press, \$12.50

Day of the Leopards completes a triad of Wimsatt's critical essays. It contains essays on eighteenth-century writers as well as polemical essays on problems which have constituted Wimsatt's life's work.

THE SHACKLE, by Colette, translated by Antonia White. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$7.95

The Shackle has never been available in book form in this country before. It is a companion novel to *The Vagabond*.

THE TIDES OF POWER: Conversations on the American Constitution, by Bob Eckhardt and Charles L. Black, Jr. Yale University Press, \$10.95

In this dialogue between a working politician and an academic, Eckhardt and Black discuss and analyze many aspects of the interaction among the three branches of government as they were formulated in the Constitution and as they have developed over the past two centuries.

POETRY AND REPRESSION, by Harold Bloom. Yale University Press, \$11.95

This reinterpretation of the full sweep of English and American romantic poetry expands Bloom's recent theoretical speculations. Emphasizing practical criticism, the book offers close readings of poems of Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Yeats, and Stevens. *Poetry and Repression* contributes importantly to ideas about literary history, working out a dialectic of the way poetic tradition emerges from the processes of revisionism and canon-formation.

SCHOOLING IN CAPITALIST AMERICA, by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. Basic Books, \$13.95

The authors (two of the nation's most respected radical economists) hold in this book that our educational system has not in the past, and does not now, provide equality of opportunity for human development. The present function of the schools is not to reform society but to reinforce it by producing the inequities which sustain it. Equality of opportunity will never be offered by our educational institutions, the authors assert, unless the inherently unequal structure of the capitalist economy of which it is an integral part, is abandoned.

C.G. JUNG—THE HAUNTED PROPHET, by Paul J. Stern. Braziller, \$9.95

Jung the prophet is one facet of the startling image of Jung that emerges in Professor Stern's book. There is also Jung the child, lost in a solitary, dream-ridden world he never made; Jung the college student at grips with paranormal events; Jung the novice psychiatrist struggling to make sense out of the nonsense of madness; Jung the husband; Jung the lover who insisted on including his ex-patient and long-time mistress Toni Wolff within his family circle; and many other faces of Jung as well.

A HISTORY OF THE CINEMA From its Origins to 1970, by Eric Rhode. Hill and Wang, \$15.00

Eric Rhode has written the one-volume history of the cinema for this decade: a history that begins with the invention of photography. It is possibly the first chronological, systematic attempt to relate movies to the societies from which they have emerged.

THE FREEDOM OF THE POET, by John Berryman. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$8.95

The selections for *The Freedom of the Poet* were made by John Berryman shortly before his death. They include published and unpublished writings, both essays and stories.

CLASS IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY: A Study of Contemporary Britain, by John Westergaard and Henrietta Resler. Basic Books, \$15.00

The subject of this book is class inequality in a major Western country—its nature and extent today in a modern capitalist society. Britain is used as a case study to illustrate and document in detail features which, in the view of the authors, are common to and inherent in contemporary capitalism throughout the Western world.

URBAN TERRORISM: Theory, Practice, and Response, by Anthony M. Burton. Free Press, \$12.95

Professor Burton clarifies our understanding of the phenomenon of urban terrorism by elucidating its historical background. He also looks at the methods of modern terrorist organizations and gives a troubling report on the available responses of governments.

JOHNSON ON JOHNSON: A Selection of the Personal and Autobiographical Writings of Samuel Johnson 1709-1784), edited by John Wain. Dutton, \$10.00

In Samuel Johnson's writings there is a shadowy autobiography—Johnson's own story in his own words. John Wain has culled the most personal, self-revelatory of these. Assisted by Wain's detailed and continuous commentary, Johnson's letters, essays, travel diaries, prayers, and poems are used to build up a fascinating picture of his childhood and youth; the years of struggle in London; his relationships with his friends and mistresses; his jaunts around the country; his health; and his views on politics, society, and God.

THE WEST END HORROR: A Posthumous Memoir of John H. Watson, M.D., edited by Nicholas Meyer. Dutton, \$7.95

In *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, Sherlock Holmes met Sigmund Freud. In *The West End Horror*, Nicholas Meyer has brought to light another previously unpublished episode in the career of the famous detective, as recorded by his close friend and associate, Dr. John H. Watson.

THE LIFE OF RAYMOND CHANDLER, by Frank MacShane. Dutton, \$10.95

MacShane has had exclusive access to Chandler's documents and has conducted extensive interviews with Chandler's surviving colleagues and lovers. The creation of Philip Marlowe, the tough but sentimental private eye, made Chandler famous and brought him into contact with a fascinating cast of characters of the 1930s and 40s. Among them were Alfred Hitchcock, Erle Stanley Gardner, Lucky Luciano, and Humphrey Bogart. Chandler himself turns out to be the most interesting character of all—the man who glorified the seamy side of life in Southern California turns out to have been a recluse and an avid Anglophile.

THE SPYMASTERS: The True Story of Anglo-American Intelligence Operations within Nazi Germany, 1939-1945, by Charles Whiting. Dutton, \$8.95

Whiting describes the infighting of the under-cover men and women—the eyes and ears of their respective governments—within Nazi Germany during World War II. He tells the story of how they eventually outwitted the *Abwehr*, infiltrated agents into virtually every section of German life, and helped bring about the surrender of the German army.

EGON SCHIELE, by Alessandra Comini. Braziller, \$15.00

Like many of his expressionist contemporaries, Egon Schiele was disturbingly dualistic: his provocative explorations of erotica do not prepare the reader for the tender side of the painter as revealed in the landscapes and lyrical town scenes treated here. The author examines the artist's sources within the context of pre-World War I society and illuminates both the ethos and the eros of Austria's greatest expressionist painter.

IN A SHALLOW GRAVE, by James Purdy. Arbor House, \$7.50

A gripping narrative of one man who comes back from the wars—not in a box, but in a shallow grave, by one of America's most notable literary and narrative talents. Set against a background of elemental forces and complex human emotion, *In a Shallow Grave* is a story of the resurrection of human love and feeling from the very depths.

THE CONSERVATIVE INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT IN AMERICA SINCE 1945, by George H. Nash. Basic Books, \$20.00

Beginning in 1945, Nash locates the origins of postwar conservatism among those intellectuals who emerged from the war deeply concerned and frequently pessimistic about America's future. Among them were those who feared the unchecked expansion of the State; others were more concerned with religious and ethical "absolutes;" while a great number warned against the growth of a militant totalitarian Communism opposed to the Western world. All of these positions, as Nash illustrates, coalesced in a number of reviews, magazines, into intellectual positions that served to create an effective intellectual force within a distinctly American frame.

THE LAST CHANCE: Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Control, by William Epstein. Free Press, \$14.95

This book, written by the Secretary of the United Nations Disarmament Commission, offers a basic history of nuclear proliferation and an incisive analysis of the threat it poses to world security.

THE MY LAI MASSACRE AND ITS COVER-UP: Beyond the Reach of Law? by Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz. Free Press, \$10.95

This crucial volume of the Peers Commission Report, its findings, conclusions, and recommendations, is now publicly available for the first time. The editors' introduction raises powerful ethical and legal questions concerning war crimes, international law, command responsibility, and the suppression of information.

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